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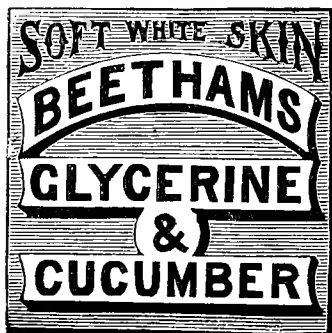
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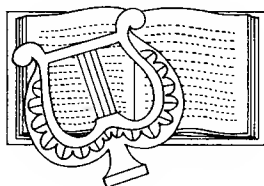
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THE TENTS OF SHEM

A Novel

BY
GRANT ALLEN

AUTHOR OF
'BABYLON,' 'THE DEVIL'S DIE,' 'THIS MORTAL COIL,' ETC.



A NEW EDITION

London
CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY
1891

TO

M. M. S.,

IN MEMORY OF MANY HAPPY DAYS

AT SIDI SALAH.

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THE TENTS OF SHEM.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE DARK CONTINENT.

Two young men of most Britannic aspect sat lounging together in long wicker chairs on the balcony of the English Club at Algiers. They had much reason. It was one of those glorious days, by no means rare, when the sky and climate of the city on the Sahel reach absolute perfection. The wistaria was draping the parapet of the balcony with its profuse tresses of rich amethyst blossom; the long and sweeping semicircle of the bay gleamed like a peacock's neck in hue, or a brilliant opal with its changeful iridescence; and the snow-clad peaks of the Djurjura in the background rose high in the air, glistening white and pink in the reflected glory of the afternoon sun. But the two young men of Britannic aspect, gazing grimly in front of them, made no comment to one another on the beauty and variety of that basking scene. How could they, indeed? They had not been introduced to one another! To admire nature, however obtrusive, in company with a man to whom you have not been introduced is a social solecism. So they sat and lounged, and stroked their moustaches reflectively, and looked at the palm-trees, and the orange-groves, and the white Moorish villas that stud the steep, smiling slopes of Mustapha-Supérieur, in the solemn silence of the true-born Englishman.

They might have sat there for ever and said nothing (in which case the world must certainly have lost the present

narrative) had not the felt presence of a Common Want impelled them at last spasmodically to a conversational effort.

‘I beg your pardon, but do you happen to have a light about you?’ the elder of the two said, in an apologetic voice, drawing a cigar, as he spoke, from the neat little morocco case in his pocket.

‘Curious, but I was just going to ask you the very same thing,’ his younger companion answered, with a bashful smile. ‘I’ve finished my last vesuvian. Suppose we go into the smoking-room and look for a match. Can you tell me where, in this abode of luxury, the smoking-room finds itself?’

‘Why, I haven’t yet investigated the question,’ the other replied, rising from his seat as he spoke, ‘but I’m open to conviction. Let’s go and see. My trade’s exploring.’

‘Then I take it for granted you’re a new-comer, like myself, as you don’t know your way about the club-rooms yet?’

‘You put your finger plump on the very point,’ the elder answered, opening a door on the left in search of the common need. ‘The fact is, I arrived in Algiers only yesterday evening.’

‘Another coincidence! Precisely my case. I crossed by last night’s boat from Marseilles. Ah, here’s the smoking-room! May I offer you a light? P’f, p’f, p’f. Thanks, that’ll do very well, I think. And how do you feel to-day, after that terrible journey?’

The elder Briton smiled a somewhat grim and restrained smile. He was tall and fair, but much bronzed with the sun.

‘Never had such a tossing in all my life before,’ he answered quietly. ‘A horrid voyage. Swaying to and fro from side to side till I thought I should fall off, and be lost to humanity. Talk of the good ship plunging on the sea, indeed, as Theo Marzials does in that rollicking song of his; any other ship I ever sailed on’s the merest trifle to it.’

‘And when did you leave England?’ his companion went on, with a polite desire, commendable in youth, to keep up the successfully inaugurated conversation. ‘You weren’t on the *Abd-el-Kader* with us from Marseilles, on Tuesday?’

‘When did I leave England?’ the new acquaintance answered, with a faint twinkle in his eye, amused at the chance of a momentary mystification. ‘I left England last

October, and I've been ever since getting to Algiers. *Per varios casus, per tot discrimina rerum.*'

'Goodness gracious! By what route?' the youth with the dark moustache inquired, distrusting the Latin, and vaguely suspecting some wily attempt to practise upon his tender years and credulity

'By the land-route from Tunis, back of the desert, *via* Biskra and Laghouat.'

'But I thought you said you'd had such an awful tossing!'

'So I did. Never felt such a tossing in the world before. But it wasn't the sea; it was the ship of the desert. I came here—as far as Blidah, at least—true Arab-wise, see-saw, on camel-back.'

The dark young man puffed away at his weed for a moment vigorously, in deep contemplation. He was a shy person who didn't like to be taken in; and he strongly suspected his new acquaintance of a desire to humbug him.

'What were you doing?' he asked, at last, in a more constrained voice, after a short pause.

'Picking flowers,' was the curt and unexpected answer.

'Oh, come now, you know,' the dark young man expostulated, with a more certain tone, for he felt he was being hoaxed. 'A fellow doesn't go all the way to the desert, of all places in the world, just for nothing else but to pick flowers.'

'Excuse me, a fellow does, if he happens to be a fellow in the flower and beetle business, which is exactly my own humble but useful avocation.'

'Why, surely, there aren't any flowers there. Nothing but sand, and sunset, and skeletons.'

'Pardon me. I've been there to see. Allow me to show you. I'll just go and fetch that portfolio over there.' And he opened it in the sunlight. 'Here are a few little water-colour sketches of my desert acquaintances.'

The dark young man glanced at them with some languid curiosity. An artist by trade himself, here at least he knew his ground. He quaked and trembled before no dawdling amateur. Turning over the first two or three sheets attentively:

'Well, you can draw,' he said at last, after a brief scrutiny.

'I don't know whether flowers like those grow in the desert

or not—I should rather bet on *not*, of the two—but I'm a painter myself, and I know at any rate you can paint them excellently, as amateurs go.'

'My one accomplishment,' the explorer answered, with a pleased expansion of the corners of his mouth; it is human to receive approbation gratefully from those who know. 'I couldn't sketch a scene or draw a figure with tolerable accuracy to save my life; but I understand the birds, and creeping things, and flowers; and sympathy, I suppose, makes me draw them, at least, sympathetically.'

'Precisely so. That's the very word,' the artist went on, examining each drawing he turned over with more and more care. 'Though your *technique's* amateurish, of course, I can see you know the flowers, their tricks and their manners, down to the very ground. But tell me now; do these things really grow in the desert?'

'On the oases, yes. The flowers there are quite brilliant and abundant. Like the Alpine flora, they seem to grow loveliest near their furthest limit. Butterfly-fertilized. But what brings you to Algeria so late in the season? All the rest of the world is turning its back now upon Africa, and hurrying away to Aix-les-Bains, and Biarritz, and Switzerland, and England. You and I will be the only people, bar Arabs and Frenchmen (who don't count), left here for the summer.'

'What, are *you* going to stop the summer here too?'

'Well, not in Algiers itself,' the explorer answered, flicking his boot with his cane for an imaginary dust-spot. 'I've been baked enough in the desert for the last six months to cook a turtle, and I'm going over yonder now, where ices grow free, for coolness and refreshment.'

And he waved his hand with a sweep across the sapphire semicircle of the glassy bay, to the great white block of rearing mountains that rose with their sheet of virgin snow against the profound azure of an African sky in the far background.

'What, to Kabylie!' the artist exclaimed with a start of surprise.

'To Kabylie, yes. The very place. You've learnt its name and its fame already, then?'

'Why, I see in this the finger of fate,' the artist answered

with more easy confidence. 'We have here, in fact, a third coincidence. It's in Kabylie that I, too, have decided on spending the summer. Perhaps, as you seem to know the way, we might manage to start on our tour together.'

'But what are you going for?' the elder man continued with an amused air.

'Oh, just to paint. Nothing more than that. The country and the people; new ground for the exhibitions. Spain's used up: so some fellows in England who know the markets advised me to go to Kabylie on an artistic exploring expedition. From our point of view, you see, it's unbroken ground, they say, or almost unbroken: and everything civilized has been so painted up, and painted down, and painted round about, of late years, by everyone everywhere, that's one's glad to get a hint of the chance of finding some unhackneyed subject in a corner of Africa. Besides, they tell me it's all extremely naïve; and I like *naïveté*. That's my line in art. I'm in quest of the unsophisticated. I paint simplicity.'

'You'll find your sitter in Kabylie: *naïveté* rampant, and simplicity with a vengeance,' the explorer answered. 'It's quite untouched and unvulgarized as yet by any taint or tinge of Parisian civilization. The aboriginal Kabylie hasn't even learnt the A B C of French culture—to sit at an *estaminet* and play dominoes.'

'So much the better. That's just what I want. Unvarnished man. The antique vase in real life. And I'm told the costumes are almost Greek in their naturalness.'

'Quite Greek, or even more so,' the explorer replied; 'though, perhaps, considering its extreme simplicity, we ought rather to say, even less so. But where do you mean to stop, and how to travel? Accommodation in Ancient Greece, you know, wasn't really luxurious.'

'Oh, I'll just set out from Algiers by diligence, I suppose, and put up for awhile at some little hotel in the country villages.'

The explorer's face could not resist a gentle smile of suppressed merriment.

'An hotel, my dear sir!' he said with surprise. 'An hotel in Kabylie! You'll find it difficult, I'm afraid, to meet with the article. Except at Fort National, which is a purely

French settlement, where you could study only the common or French Zouave engaged in his familiar avocation of playing bowls and sipping absinthe, there's not such a thing as a cabaret, a lodging, a wayside inn, in the whole block of mountain country. Strangers who want to explore Kabylie may go if they like to the house of the village headman, the *amine*, as they call him, where you may sup off a nasty mess of pounded *cous-cous*, and sleep at night on a sort of shelf or ledge among the goats and the cattle. Government compels every *amine* to provide one night's board and entertainment for any European traveller who cares to demand it. But the entertainment provided is usually so very varied and so very lively that those who have tried it once report on it unfavourably. *Verbum sap.* It's too entomological. When you go to Kabylie, *don't* do as the Kabyles do.'

'But how do you mean to manage yourself?' the artist asked with the prudence of youth. He was nettled at having made so stupid a mistake at the very outset about the resources of the mountains, and not quite certain that he grasped the meaning of *verbum sap.* (his Latin being strictly a negative quantity), so he took refuge in the safe device of a question that turned the tables. 'I came to Algiers hoping to pick up some information as to ways and means as soon as I got here; and since you seem to know the ropes so well, perhaps you'll give a raw hand the benefit of your riper experience.'

'Oh, I have my tent,' the traveller answered, with the quiet air of a man who has made his way alone about the world. 'It's a first-rate tent for camping-out in; it's supplied with the electric light, a hydraulic lift, hot water laid on, and all the latest modern improvements—metaphorically speaking,' he hastened to add by an afterthought, for he saw his companion's large gray eyes opening wider and wider with astonishment each moment. 'It's awfully comfortable, you know, as deserts go, and I could easily rig up a spare bed; so if you really mean to paint in Kabylie, and will bear a share in the expenses of carriage, it might suit both our books, perhaps, if you were to engage my furnished apartments. For I'm not overburdened with spare cash myself—no naturalist ever is—and I'm by no means above taking in a lodger, if any eligible person presents himself at

the tent with good references and an unblemished character. Money not so much an object as congenial society in a respectable family.'

It was a kind offer, playfully veiled under the cloak of mutual accommodation, and the painter took it at once as it was meant.

'How very good of you!' he said. 'I'm immensely obliged. Nothing on earth would suit my plans better, if it wouldn't be trespassing too much on your kind hospitality.'

'Not at all,' the explorer answered, with a good-humoured nod. 'Don't mention that. To say the truth, I shall be glad of a companion. The Arab palls after a month or two of his polite society. And I love Art, too, though I don't pretend myself to understand it. We'll talk the matter over a little, as to business arrangements over a cup of coffee, and I dare say, when we've compared notes, we shall manage to hit things off comfortably together.'

'May we exchange cards?' the artist asked, pulling out a silver-bound case from his breast-pocket, and handing one of its little regulation pasteboards to his new friend.

The explorer glanced at it and read the name, 'Vernon Blake, Gresholm Road, Guildford.'

'I've no card of my own,' he made answer, as he pocketed it; 'in the desert, you see, cards were of very little use; Bedouins don't drop them on one another. But my name's Le Marchant—Eustace Le Marchant, of Jersey, beetle-sticker.'

'Oh, but I know your name,' Blake cried eagerly, delighted to show himself not wholly ignorant of a distinguished naturalist. 'You're an F.R.S., aren't you? Ah, yes, I thought so. I've seen notices of you often in the paper, I'm sure, as having gone somewhere and found out something. Do you know, if I'd only known that before, I think I should have been afraid to accept your kind offer. I'm an awfully ignorant sort of a fellow myself—far too ignorant to go camping-out with an F.R.S. in the wilds of Africa.'

'If being an F.R.S. is the worst crime you can bring to my charge,' Le Marchant answered with a smile, 'I dare say we shall pull together all very well. And if you meet no worse society than F.R.S.'s in the wilds of Africa, though it's me that says it, as oughtn't to say it, your luck will have been very exceptional indeed. But I don't think you need

be much afraid of me. I'm an F.R.S. of the mildest type. I never call anything by its longest and ugliest Latin name: I never bore other people with interesting details of anatomical structure: I never cut up anything alive (bar oysters), and I never lecture, publicly or privately, to anybody, anywhere, on any consideration. There are two kinds of naturalists, you know: and I'm one of the wrong kind. The superior class live in London or Paris, examine everything minutely with a great big microscope, tack on inches of Greek nomenclature to an insignificant mite or bit of moss, and split hairs against anybody with marvellous dexterity. That's science. It dwells in a museum. For my part, I detest it. The inferior class live in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America, as fate or fancy carries; and, instead of looking at everything in a dried specimen, go out into the wild woods with rifle on shoulder, or box in hand, and observe the birds, and beasts, and green things of the earth, as God made them, in their own natural and lovely surroundings. That's natural history, old-fashioned, simple, commonplace natural history; and I, for my part, am an old-fashioned naturalist. I've been all winter watching the sandy-gray creatures on the sandy-gray desert, preparing for my great work on "Structure and Function," and now, through the summer, I want to correct and correlate my results by observing the plants and animals and insects of the mountains in Kabylie. To tell you the truth, I think I shall like you—for I, too, have a taste for simplicity. If you come with me, I can promise you sport and healthy fare, and make you comfortable in my furnished apartments. Let's descend to details—for this is business—and we must understand exactly what each of us wants before either of us binds himself down formally for five months to the other. Alphonse, a couple of coffees and two *petits verres* at once, here, will you?

And by the clarifying aid of a cigar and a *chasse-café*, it was finally decided, before the evening sun flushed the Djurjura purple, and turned the white Arab walls to pink, that Vernon Blake should accompany Eustace Le Marchant, on almost nominal terms as to the sharing of expenses, on his summer trip to the mountains of Grande Kabylie.

CHAPTER II.

HONOURS.

SOMEWHERE about the same time, away over in England, Iris Knyvett sat one morning at lunch, drumming with her fingers on the table before her that particular tattoo which the wisdom of our ancestors ascribed to the author of all evil.

Iris Knyvett herself would, no doubt, have been very much astonished if only she could have been told, by some prescient visitor, that her own fate was in any way bound up with the proposed expedition of two unknown young men from the English Club at Algiers into the wilds of Kabylie. She had hardly heard (save in the catalogue of the Institute) the name of Vernon Blake; while Eustace Le Marchant's masterly papers before the Linnean Society on the Longicorn Beetles of the Spice Islands, had never roused her girlish enthusiasm, or quickened her soul to a fiery thirst for the study of entomology. And yet, if she had but known it, Iris Knyvett's whole future in life depended utterly, as so often happens with everyone of us, on the casual encounter of those two perfect strangers among the green recesses of the North African mountains.

In absolute ignorance of which profound truth, Iris Knyvett herself went on drumming with her fingers impatiently on the table, and leaving the filleted sole on her plate to grow cold, unheeded, in the cool shade of a fair lady's neglect.

'Iris, my dear,' Mrs. Knyvett said sharply, with a dry cough, 'why don't you eat your lunch? Your appetite's frightful. What makes you go on hammering away at that dreadful tattoo so?'

Iris's eyes came back with a bound from a point in space lying apparently several thousand miles behind the eminently conventional Venetian scene that hangs above the sideboard in every gentleman's dining-room.

'I can't eat anything, I really think, mamma,' she said, with a slight sigh, 'till I've had that telegram.'

Mrs. Knyvett helped herself to a second piece of filleted sole and its due proportion of anchovy sauce with great

deliberation, before she answered slowly, 'Oh, so you're expecting a telegram!'

'Yes, mamma,' Iris replied, with scarcely a shade of reasonable vexation on her pretty face. 'Don't you remember, dear, I told you my tutor promised to telegraph to me?'

'Your tutor! oh, did he?' Mrs. Knyvett went on with polite acquiescence, letting drop her *pincc-nez* with a dexterous elevation of her arched eyebrows. The principal feature of Mrs. Knyvett's character, indeed, was a Roman nose of finely developed proportions; but it was one of those insipid Roman noses which stand for birth alone—which impart neither dignity, firmness, nor strength to a face, but serve only to attest their owner's aristocratic antecedents. Mrs. Knyvett's was useful mainly to support her *pincc-nez*, but as her father had been the Dean of a southern cathedral, it also managed incidentally to support the credit of her family. 'Oh, did he!' Mrs. Knyvett repeated after a pause, during which Iris continued to tattoo uninterruptedly. 'That was very kind of him.' Though why on earth, or concerning what, he should wish to telegraph, Mrs. Knyvett, who had never been told more than five hundred times before, had really not the slightest conception.

'Not *he*, mamma. You must surely remember I've reminded you over and over again that my tutor's name is Emily Vanrenen.'

'Then why does she sign herself "E. Vanrenen, B.A. and D.Sc.," I wonder?' Mrs. Knyvett went on with dreamy uncertainty. 'A Doctor of Science ought surely to be a man? And Bachelor of Arts, too—Bachelor of Arts! Bachelors and spinsters are getting too mixed, too mixed altogether.'

Iris was just going to answer something gently, as was her wont, in defence of the mixture, when a rap at the door made her jump up hastily.

'That must be the telegram!' she cried with a tremor, and darted off to the door in a vigorous dash that sufficiently showed her Girton training had at least not quite succeeded in crushing the life out of her.

'Iris, Iris!' her mother called after her in horror; 'let Jane answer the door, my dear. This unseemly procedure—and at lunch-time, too—is really quite unpardonable. In my time girls——'

But Iris was well out of hearing long since, and Mrs. Knyvett was forced to do penance vicariously herself on her daughter's account to the offended fetish of the British drawing-room.

In another minute the bright young girl had come back crestfallen, ushering in before her a stout and rosy-faced middle-aged gentleman, also distinguished by a Roman nose to match, and dressed with the scrupulous and respectable neatness of the London barrister.

'It's only Uncle Tom!' she cried, disappointed.

'It's only Uncle Tom!' the stout, red-faced gentleman echoed good-humouredly. 'Well, for taking the conceit out of a man, I'll back the members of one's own family, and more especially and particularly one's prettiest and most favourite niece, against all comers, for a hundred pounds a side, even money. That's all the thanks I get, is it, Iris? for coming out of Court in the midst of a most important case, and leaving my junior, a thick-headed Scotchman as ever was born, to cross-examine the leading witness for the other side, on purpose to ask you whether you've got a telegram: and "Only Uncle Tom" are the very first words my prettiest niece thinks fit to greet me with after all my devotion.'

And he stooped down as Iris seated herself at the table once more, and kissed her affectionately on her smooth white forehead.

'Oh, uncle!' Iris cried, blushing up to her pretty blue eyes with ingenuous distress at having even for a moment appeared to slight him—'I didn't mean that. You know I didn't mean it. I'm always pleased and delighted to see you. But the fact is, I was expecting the telegram; and I ran to the door when you rat-tat-tatted, thinking it was the telegraph boy; and when I saw it was only you—I mean, when I saw it was you, of course—why. I was naturally disappointed not to have got the news about it all. But did you really come up all the way from Court on purpose to hear it, you dear old uncle?'

'All the way from Court, with Coleridge, C.J., smiling cynically at my best witnesses, I give you my word of honour, Iris,' the red-faced old gentleman answered, mollified; 'for nothing on earth except to hear about a certain

pretty little niece of mine—because I knew the pretty little niece was so very anxious on the subject.'

'Oh, uncle, that *was* kind of you,' Iris cried aloud, flushing up to her eyes once more, this time with pleasure. A little sympathy went a long way with her. 'It's so good of you to take so much interest in me.'

'My unfortunate client won't say so,' Uncle Tom muttered half aloud to himself.

And, indeed, the misguided persons who had retained and refreshed Thomas Kynnersley Whitmarsh, Q.C., the eminent authority on probate cases, would probably not have learned with unmingled pleasure this touching instance of his domestic affection.

'But what's it all about, dear Tom?' Mrs. Knyvett exclaimed in a querulous tone and with a puzzled air. 'What do Iris and you want to get a telegram from this ambiguous tutor of hers for?'

Uncle Tom was just about to enlighten his sister's darkness (for the five hundred and first time), when poor Iris, unable to control her feelings any longer, rose from the table, with tears standing in her pretty blue eyes, and remarked, in a slightly husky voice, that she could eat nothing, and would go and wait for the telegram in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Knyvett looked after her, bewildered and amazed.

'This sort of thing makes girls very strange,' she said sapiently.

'This sort of thing,' being that idol of our age, the Higher Education.

'Well, well, it's done *her* no harm, anyhow,' Uncle Tom answered, with stout good-humour, for his niece was a great favourite of his, in spite of her heresies. 'I don't approve of all this fal-lal and nonsense myself, either; but Iris is a Knyvett, you see, and the Knyvetts always struck out a line for themselves; and each Knyvett strikes out a different one. She's struck out hers. She didn't get that from *us*, you may be sure. Nobody could ever accuse the Whitmarshes of eccentricity or originality. We get on, but we get on steadily. It's dogged that does it with our family, Amelia. The Knyvetts are different. They go their own way, and it's no good anybody else trying to stop them.'

‘What would her poor dear father say to it all, I wonder?’ Mrs. Knyvett remarked parenthetically, through a mist of sighs.

‘He would say, “Let her go her own way,”’ the eminent Q.C. replied with cheerful haste; ‘and if it comes to that, whether he said it or not wouldn’t much matter, for in her own quiet, peaceable, unobtrusive manner, offending nobody, Iris would go her own way, in spite of him. Yes, Amelia, I say, in spite of him. After all, it’s not been at all a bad thing, in some respects, that our dear girl should have taken up with this higher education fad. We don’t approve of it; but, if it’s done nothing else, it’s kept her at least out of the way of the fortune-hunters.’

‘Iris has great expectations,’ Mrs. Knyvett remarked complacently. She remarked it, not because her brother was not already well aware of the fact, but because the thought was in her own mind, and she uttered it, as she uttered all other platitudes that happened to occur to her, in the full expectation that her hearer would find them as interesting as she did.

‘Iris has great expectations!’ her brother echoed. ‘No doubt in the world, I think, about that. By the terms of the old Admiral’s will, ridiculous as they are, I hardly imagine Sir Arthur would venture to leave the property otherwise. To do so would be risky, with me against him. And if Iris had gone into London Society, and been thrown into the whirl of London life, instead of reading her “Odyssey” and her “Lucretius,” and mugging up amusing works on conic sections, it’s my belief some penniless beggar—an Irish adventurer, perhaps, if such a creature survives nowadays—would have fallen upon her and snapped her up long ago; especially before she came into her fortune. Then it seems to be almost disinterested. Now, this Cambridge scheme has saved us from all the trouble and bother of that sort of thing—it’s ferried us across the most dangerous time—it’s helped us to bridge over the thin ice, till Iris is a woman, and quite fit to take care of herself.’

‘There’s something in that,’ Mrs. Knyvett responded, with a stately nod of the prominent feature. It seemed somehow to revolve independently on its own axis.

‘*Something* in that!’ her brother cried, amazed, as though

his own 'devil' had ventured to agree with him. 'There's a great deal in that, Amelia! There's everything in that! There's worlds in that! It's the "Iliad" in a nutshell. The girl's done the very best thing on earth for herself. She's saved her expectations—her great expectations—from the greedy maw of every eavesdropping London fortune-hunter.'

At that moment another rat-tat at the door made Uncle Tom start in his chair, and Iris's voice was heard upon the stairs as she rushed down from the drawing-room to the front-door in sudden trepidation. Endless terrors crowded upon her mind as she went. She was *quite* safe about her Latin prose, to be sure, but oh! that unspeakable, that terrible mistake in the unseen passage from Plato's 'Republic!' It would spoil all, that false second aorist! It *was* the telegram this time, sure enough, without further delay. Iris tore it open in an agony of suspense. Had the second aorist betrayed her girlish trust? Had Plato repelled her platonic affections? Then her heart stopped beating for a moment, as she read the words:

'Cambridge University, Classical Tripos: Women. First Class, Iris Knyvett, Girton, bracketed equal, Third Classic. Sincerest congratulations. We are all so proud.

'Affectionately yours,

'E. VANRENEN.'

Oh, cruel century that has put such a strain upon a growing woman! Uncle Tom seized the half-fainting girl tenderly in his arms, and, wringing her hand a dozen times over, in spite of his disapproval of the higher education for women (which his present chronicler blushes to share), kissed her and congratulated her turn about in one unceasing tide for the next five minutes; while poor Iris's head, giddy with her triumph, swam round and round in a wild delirium of delight and amazement. Third Classic! In her highest mood of hope she had never expected anything like this. She cried to herself silently in her joy and satisfaction.

'But what does it all mean?' Mrs. Knyvett exclaimed, adjusting the *pince-nez* on its pre-ordained stand once more with practised skill, and gazing vacantly from the telegram

to Iris, and from Iris to the telegram. 'Is it—very much worse—much lower than she expected?'

'What does it all mean, ma'am?' Uncle Tom exclaimed, flinging prudence to the dogs, and his cherished convictions to the four winds of heaven. 'What does it all mean? I like your question, indeed! Why, it means just this—God bless my soul, how the girl trembles!—that your own daughter, Iris Knyvett, has beaten all the men but two in Cambridge University into a cocked hat. That's what it means, ma'am. That's what it means! I don't approve of it; but, upon my soul, I'm proud of her! Your daughter Iris is Third Classic.'

CHAPTER III.

BY MOORISH MOUNTAINS.

A WEEK later, preparations were complete. The tent had been arranged for mountain travelling; a folding-bed had been set up for the lodger's accommodation; stores had been laid in from that universal provider of Algerian necessities, Alexander Dunlop, in the Rue d'Isly; a Mahonnais Spaniard from the Balearic Isles had been secured as servant to guard the camp; and Blake and Le Marchant, on varying ends intent, had fairly started off for their tour of inspection through the peaks and passes of the Kabylean Highlands. The artist's kit included a large and select assortment of easels, brushes, pigments, canvas, pencils, and Whatman's paper; the naturalist's embraced a good modern fowling-piece, an endless array of boxes for skins and specimens, and a fine collection of butterfly-nets, chloroform bottles, entomological pins, and materials for preserving birds, animals, and botanical treasures. Le Marchant, as the older and more experienced traveller, had charged himself with all the necessary arrangements as to packing and provisions; and when Blake looked on at the masterly way in which his new friend managed to make a couple of packing-cases and a cork-mattress do duty for a bedstead, at the same time that they contained, in their deep recesses, the needful creature comforts for a three

months' tour among untrodden ways, he could not sufficiently congratulate himself upon the lucky chance which had thrown him, on the balcony of the Club at Algiers that particular afternoon, in company with so competent and so skilful an explorer. He had fallen on his feet, indeed, without knowing it.

A lovely morning of bright African sunshine saw the two set forth in excellent spirits from the hotel at Tizi-Ouzou, the furthest French village in the direction of Kabylie, whither they had come the previous day by diligence from Algiers, to attack the mountains of the still barbaric and half-conquered Kabyles.

'Are the mules ready?' Le Marchant asked of the waiter at the little country inn where they had passed the night, as he swallowed down the last drop of his morning coffee.

'Monsieur,' the waiter answered, wiping his mouth with his greasy apron as he spoke, 'the Arabs say the mules will be at the door in half an hour.'

'The Arabs say!' Le Marchant repeated, with an impatient movement of his bronzed hand. 'In half an hour, indeed! The sloth of the Arab! I know these fellows. That means ten o'clock, at the very earliest. It's now seven, and unless we get under way within twenty minutes, the sun 'll be so hot before we reach a resting-place, that we shall deliquesce like Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs in "The Vicar of Wakefield." I'll go out and hurry them up, Blake, with a little gentle moral suasion.'

Blake followed his host curiously to the door, where half a dozen ragged Orientals, picturesquely clad in a costume about equally divided between bernouse and dirt, were sprawling at their ease on a heap of soft dust in the full front of the morning sunshine.

'Get up, my friends,' Le Marchant cried aloud in excellent Arabic, for he was a born linguist. 'If the mules are not ready in five minutes by the watch I hold in my hand, by the beard of the Prophet, I solemnly tell you, you may go every man to his own home without a sou, and I will hire other mules, with the blessing of Allah, from better men than you are to take us on our journey.'

Blake did not entirely understand colloquial Arabic when rapidly spoken—in fact, his own linguistic studies stopped

short suddenly at his mother tongue, and so much French in the Ollendorffian dialect as enabled him to state fluently that the gardener's son had given his apple to the daughter of the carpenter—but he was greatly amused to see the instantaneous effect which this single sonorous sentence, rolled quietly but very firmly out in distinct tones, produced upon the nerves of the sprawling Arabs. They rose from the dust-heap as if by magic. In a moment all was bustle, and turmoil, and confusion. The tent and beds were hastily laden with infinite shrieks on the patient mules; boxes were strapped on—with many strange cords and loud cries of 'Arri!'—to the backs of donkeys; arms and legs were flung wildly about in multitudinous gesticulations of despair and inability: and before the five minutes were fairly over by that inexorable watch which Le Marchant held with stern resolve before him, the little cavalcade started off at a trot in the direction of the still snow-clad summits of the nearer Djurjura.

It was a quaint small caravan, as it mounted the hillside. The two Englishmen rode unburdened mules; the ragged Arabs, barefoot and melting, ran after them with shouts of guttural depth, and encouraged the pack-beasts with loud jerky remonstrances—'Oh, father of fools, and son of a jackass, will you not get up and hurry yourself more quickly?'

'Where are we going?' Blake asked at last, as the high-road that had conducted them for a mile from Tizi-Ouzou dwindled down abruptly near a steep slope to a mere aboriginal Kabyle mule-track, beset with stones, and overhung by thickets of prickly cactus.

'How should I know?' the naturalist answered, with a vague wave of the hand. 'We're going to Kabylie. That's enough for the moment. When we get there, we'll look about for a suitable spot, and pitch our tent wherever there's a patch of smooth enough ground for a man to pitch on. "Sufficient unto the day" is the explorer's motto. Your true traveller never decides anything beforehand. He goes where fate and fortune lead him. What we both want is to explore the unknown. We'll make our headquarters within its border, wherever we find a convenient resting-place.'

'Are the Kabyles black?' Blake ventured to ask, with a

sidelong look, unburdening his soul of a secret doubt that had long possessed it.

'Oh dear no, scarcely even brown,' Le Marchant answered. 'They're most of them every bit as white as you and I are. They're the old aboriginal Romanized population—the Berbers, in fact—driven up into the hills by the Arab invasion in the seventh century. Practically speaking, you know, Jugurtha and Masinissa and Juba were Kabyles.'

Blake had never heard of these gentlemen's names before; but he veiled his ignorance with an acquiescent 'Really!'

They rode on, talking of many things and various, for two or three hours, under the brilliant sunshine. But all the way as they rode they were mounting steadily, by devious native tracks, steep and picturesque, just broad enough for two mules to mount abreast, and opening out at every step magnificent views over the surrounding country. To right and left stood several white villages perched on spurs of the mountain-tops, with their olive groves, and tombs, and tiny domed mosques; while below lay wooded gorges of torrent streams, overhung and draped by rich festoons of great African clematis. Blake had never travelled in the South before, and his artist eye was charmed at each turn by such novel beauties of the Southern scenery.

'This is glorious!' he cried at last, halting his mule at a sudden bend of the track. 'I shall do wonders here. I feel the surroundings exactly suit me. What could be more lovely than this luxuriant vegetation? I understand now those lines of Tennyson's in the "Daisy." So rich! So luscious! And look, up there on the mountain-side, that beautiful little mosque with its round white dome, embowered in its thicket of orange-trees and fan-palms! It's a dream of delight. It almost makes a man drop into poetry!'

'Yes, it's beautiful, certainly—very, very beautiful,' Le Marchant replied, in a soberer voice, glancing up meditatively. 'You never get mountain masses shaped like these in the cold North; those steep scarped precipices and jagged pinnacles would be quite impossible in countries ground flat and worn into shape by the gigantic mangle of the Great Ice Age.'

'The great what?' Blake asked, with a faint tingling

sense of doubt and shame. He was afraid of his life Le Marchant was going to be horribly scientific.

'The Great Ice Age—the glacial epoch, you know; the period of universal glacier development, which planned and shaved all the mountain heights in Northern Europe to a common dead-level.'

'I never heard of it,' Blake answered, shaking his head, with a blush, but thinking it best at the same time to make a clean breast of his ignorance at one fell swoop. 'I don't think it was mentioned in my history of England. I'm such a duffer at books, you know. To tell you the truth, I understand very little, except perspective. I've read nothing but the English poets; and those I've got at my finger-ends; but I don't remember anything in Milton or Shelley about the Great Ice Age. My father, you see, was a painter before me; and as I began to show a—well, a disposition for painting very early, he took me away from school when I was quite a little chap, and put me into his own studio, and let me pick up what I could by the way; so I've never had any general education at all to speak of. But I admire learning—in other fellows. I always like to hear clever men talk together.'

'The best of all educations is the one you pick up,' Le Marchant answered kindly. 'Those of us who have been to schools and universities generally look back upon our wasted time there as the worst-spent part of all our lives. You're crammed there with rubbish you have afterwards to discard in favour of such realities as those you mention—perspective, for example, and English literature.'

As he spoke, they turned sharply down to a rushing brook by a Kabyle village, where two or three tall and lissome native girls, fair as Italians, or even as Englishwomen, in their simple and picturesque Oriental costume, were washing clothes at a tiny ford, and laughing and talking merrily with one another as they bent over their work. The scene irresistibly attracted Blake. The garb of the girls was, indeed, most Greek and graceful; and their supple limbs and lithe natural attitudes might well arouse a painter's or a sculptor's interest.

'By Jove!' he cried. 'Le Marchant, I should like to sketch them. Anything so picturesque I never saw in my

life before. "Sunburnt mirth," as Keats calls it in "The Nightingale." Just watch that girl stooping down to pound a cloth with a big round stone there. Why, Phidias never imagined anything more graceful, more shapely, more exquisite!

She's splendid, certainly,' the naturalist answered, surveying the girl's pose with more measured commendation. 'A fine figure, I admit, well propped and vigorous. No tight-lacing there. No deformity of fashion. The human form divine, in unspoiled beauty, as it came straight from the hands of its Creator.'

'Upon my word, Le Marchant,' the painter went on enthusiastically, 'I've half a mind to stop the caravan this very moment, undo the pack, unroll the papers, and get out my machinery on the spot to sketch her.'

Maturer years yielded less to the passing impulse of the moment.

'I wouldn't if I were you,' the naturalist answered more coolly. 'You'll see lots more of the same sort, no doubt, all through Kabylie. The species is probably well diffused. You can paint them by the score when we reach our resting-place.'

As Blake paused, irresolute, the girls looked up and laughed good-humouredly at the evident admiration of the two well-dressed and well-equipped young infidels. They were not veiled like Arab women: their faces and arms and necks were bare, and their feet and ankles naked to the knee; for the old Berber population of North Africa, to whose race the Kabyles of Algeria belong, retain unchanged to this day their antique Roman freedom of manners and intercourse. The girls' features were all of them pretty, with a certain frank and barbaric boldness of outline. Though shy of strangers, they were clearly amused; the one who had attracted their special attention looked almost coquettishly across at Le Marchant, as he turned his beast with sterner resolve up the slope of the mountain.

'They're splendid creatures,' the naturalist said, looking back a little regretfully, while they rode up the opposite side, and left the brook and the girls for ever behind them. 'That sort of face certainly lives long in one's memory. I immensely admire these free children of nature. Just watch

that girl coming down the hillside yonder now with her pitcher on her head—how gracefully she poses it! how lightly she trips! What freedom, what ease, what untrammelled movement!

‘By George, yes,’ Blake answered, taking in the scene with his quick artistic glance. ‘It’s glorious! It’s splendid! From the purely æsthetic point of view, you know, these women are far better and finer in every way than the civilized product.’

‘And why from the purely æsthetic point of view alone?’ his companion asked quickly, with a shade of surprise. ‘Why not also viewed as human beings in their concrete totality? Surely there’s something extremely attractive to a sympathetic mind in the simplicity, the *naïveté*, the frank and unpretentious innate humanity of the barbaric woman.’

‘Oh, hang it all, you know, Le Marchant!’ the artist expostulated in a half-amused tone. ‘They’re all very well as models to sketch, but you can’t expect a civilized man to be satisfied permanently—on any high ground—with such creatures as that, now.’

‘I don’t exactly see why not,’ Le Marchant answered seriously, gazing down once more from the zigzag path on the laughing group of barefooted Kabyle girls, with their smooth round arms and their well-turned ankles. ‘Humanity to me is always human. I’ve lived a great deal among many queer people—Malays and Arabs and Japanese, and so forth—and I’ve come in the end to the modest conclusion that man, as man, is everywhere man, and man only. Emotionally, at least, we are all of one blood all the world over.’

‘But you couldn’t conceive yourself marrying a Kabyle girl, could you?’

‘As at present advised, I see no just cause or impediment to the contrary.’

Blake turned up his eyes to heaven for a moment in mute amazement.

‘Well, I’m not built that way, anyhow,’ he went on, after a pause, with a certain subdued sense of inward self-congratulation:

“I to herd with narrow foreheads, vacant of our glorious gains,
Like a beast with lower pleasures, like a beast with lower pains!”

No, thank you. For my part, I agree with the poet. I count the gray barbarian lower than the Christian child. None of your squalid savages for me. If ever I marry, which I hope I shall be able to do some of these fine days, the girl I marry must be at least my equal in intellect and attainments—and that, bar painting, she might easily manage in all conscience; but for choice, I should prefer her to be highly-educated—a Princess Ida sort of a woman.'

'Then, I take it, you admire these new-fashioned, over-educated epicene creatures?' Le Marchant interposed, smiling.

'Well, not exactly over-educated, perhaps,' Blake answered apologetically (he was too much overawed to handle epicene); 'but, at any rate, I like them thorough ladies, and well brought up, and as clever as they make them.'

'Clever. Ah, yes! That's quite another thing. Cleverness is an underlying natural endowment; but crammed; no, thank you, not for me, at any rate!'

They paused for a moment, each pursuing his own line of thought unchecked; then the painter began again in a musing voice: 'Did you happen to see in the English papers, before we left Algiers, that a Girton girl had just been made Third Classic at Cambridge?'

'I did,' Le Marchant answered, with a touch of pity in his tone; 'and I was heartily sorry for her.'

'Why sorry for her? It's a very great honour!'

'Because I think the strain of such a preparation too great to put upon any woman. Then that's the sort of girl you'd like to marry, is it?'

'Well, yes; other things equal, such as beauty and position, I'm inclined to think so. She must be pretty, of course, that goes without saying—pretty, and graceful, and a lady, and all that sort of thing—one takes that for granted; but, given so much, I should like her also to be really well educated. You see, I've never had any education to speak of myself, so I should prefer my wife to have enough of that commodity on hand for both of us.'

'Quite so,' Le Marchant answered, with a faint smile. 'You'd consent to put up, in fact, with a perfect paragon, who was also a Girton girl and a Third Classic! I admire your modesty, and I hope you may get her.'

A fork in the road, with the practical necessity for deciding which of the two alternative tracks they should next take, put a limit for the moment to their conversation.

CHAPTER IV

ENTER A HEROINE.

‘WHICH way shall we go?’ Blake asked, halting his mule for a second where the paths divided.

‘I leave these questions always to the divine arbitrament of my patron goddess,’ Le Marchant answered lightly, tossing a sou, and little knowing how much his future fate depended upon the final decision. ‘Let chance decide. Heads, right! tails, left! The heads have it. Hi, you, Ahmed or Ali, or whatever your blessed name is,’ he went on in Arabic, to the men behind, ‘do you know where this path on the right leads to?’

‘To the mountain of the Beni-Merzoug, Excellency,’ the ragged Arab nearest his mule made answer respectfully. ‘It’s a good village for you to stop at, as Allah decrees. The Beni-Merzoug are the most famous makers of jewellery and pottery among all the Kabyles.’

‘That’ll just suit our book, I say,’ Le Marchant went on in English, translating the remark in the vernacular to Blake. ‘Chance, as usual, has decided right. A wonderful goddess. To the Beni-Merzoug let it be at once, then.’ And he pocketed the sou that had sealed his fortune. Oh, fateful sou, to be gilt hereafter in purest gold, and worn round fair lady’s neck in a jewelled locket!

They mounted still, past rocky ledges, where hardly a goat could find a dubious foothold, but where Kabyle industry had nevertheless sown pathetic plots or strips of corn or cabbages—for is there not pathos in ineffective labour?—till they came at last, late in the afternoon, to a gray old village, grimly perched on the summit of a minor mountain. ‘These are the Beni-Merzoug,’ the Arabs said, halting their mules in a line at the entry of the street. ‘Here the track stops. We can go no further.’

‘Let’s look about for a spot to pitch our tent upon, then,’

Le Marchant exclaimed, as they unloaded their burden. 'No easy job hereabouts, either, I should say. On the desert, one had always the embarrassment of riches in that respect; here, on these rugged rocky slopes, it would be hard to find ten square yards of level ground anywhere.'

Nevertheless, after a quarter of an hour's diligent search, not unembarrassed by the curiosity of the Kabyles as to the new-comers, a spot was found, close by the village headman's house, in the shadow of a pretty little white-domed tomb, overhung by ash-trees, from whose spreading boughs the wild vine drooped in graceful tresses. It seemed to Blake the absolute ideal summer camping-place. Around, great masses of tumbled mountains swayed and tossed like the waves of a boisterous sea; below, deep ravines hung in mid-air, with their thick covering of Mediterranean pine and evergreen oak and Spanish chestnut; while above, in the distance, the silent white peaks of the snowy Djurjura still gleamed and shimmered, high over the hilltops, in the evening sun. The painter could have stood and gazed at it for hours, but for the need for action; it was with an effort that he turned from that lovely prospect to bear his part in the prosaic work of tent-pegging and unpacking for the evening's rest.

By this time a noisy crowd of Kabyles from the village had gathered round the spot selected by the visitors, and begun to canvass in eager terms the motive of their visit and the nature of their arrangements. The natives were clearly ill-satisfied at their choice. Le Marchant, though a tolerable Arabic scholar, knew not one word as yet of the Kabyle language; so he was unable to hold any communication with the men, who themselves were equally guiltless for the most part of either French or Arabic. It was evident, however, that the Kabyles as a whole regarded their proceedings with extreme distaste, and that the headman of the village, and a girl by his side, who seemed to be either his wife or daughter, had considerable trouble in restraining this feeling from breaking out into acts of open hostility.

The girl, in particular, at once arrested both the young Englishmen's passing attention. It was no wonder if she did. So glorious a figure they had seldom seen. Tall and lithe, with strong and well-made limbs, she seemed scarcely

so dark as many English ladies, but with a face of peculiar strength and statuesque beauty. In type, she was not unlike the merry Kabyle maiden who had looked up at them and laughed as they passed the washing-place by the torrent that morning; but her style was in every way nobler and higher. The features were bold and sculpturesque and powerful; serene intelligence shone out from her big eyes; she looked, Le Marchant thought, as a Spartan maiden might have looked in the best days of Sparta—as free as she was supple, and as strong as she was beautiful. At first, while the earlier preparations were being made, she hung aloof from the new-comers as if in speechless awe; but after a short time, as the crowd around grew less unruly and boisterous, and the attempts at intercommunication began to succeed, she approached somewhat nearer, and, equally removed from coquetry or boldness, watched their proceedings with the utmost interest.

At the outset, while the Spaniard and the Arabs helped in the work of setting up camp, conversation between the new-comers was carried on almost entirely in pigeon French. And of French, even in its pigeon variety, the girl was clearly quite ignorant.

'*Vous ne parlez pas Français?*' Le Marchant asked her tentatively.

But the Kabyle maiden shook her head with a vigorous dissent, and put her finger to her mouth in sign of silence. So he turned away, and went on with his unpacking, while the girl, poised in a most picturesque attitude, with her arm on the ledge of the little domed tomb, stood by expectant, with a mutely attentive face, or made some remark now and again, in a low voice, to her fellow-countrymen, who stood aloof in the distance. They seemed to treat her with unusual respect, as a person of some distinction. No doubt she must be the headman's wife, Le Marchant thought, from the tone of command in which she spoke to them.

'Hand me that rope there, quick,' the naturalist called out at last, in English, to Blake. 'Look sharp, will you? I want to fasten it down at once to this peg here.'

The beautiful Kabyle girl started at the words in the most profound surprise; but, to Le Marchant's astonishment, rose up at once, and handed him the rope, as though

it was her he had asked for it, without a moment's hesitation.

'Curious how quick these half-barbaric people are to understand whatever one says to them in an unknown language,' Le Marchant went on, in a satisfied tone, to his English companion. 'This girl snapped up what I meant at once by the inflexion of my voice, you see, when I asked you for the rope, though I never even pointed my hand towards what I wanted.'

'I can talk like that myself,' the girl answered quietly, in English almost as good as Le Marchant's own, though with a very faint flavour of liquid Oriental accent. 'I heard you ask for the rope, and I fancied, of course, you were speaking to me, and so I gave it to you. But I thought,' she added, with much natural dignity, 'you might have asked me a little more politely.'

If the girl was surprised to hear Le Marchant, Le Marchant, in turn, was positively thunderstruck to hear the girl. He could hardly believe the direct evidence of his own ears.

'Do they speak with tongues in these parts?' he cried, amazed; 'or has much wandering made me mad, I wonder? Come over here, Blake, and explain this mystery. This lady positively answered me in English.'

'We speak with our tongues, of course,' the girl went on, half angrily, misunderstanding his old-fashioned Scriptural phrase, 'just the same as you and everybody else do. We're human, I suppose! we're not monkeys. But, perhaps, you think, like all other Frenchmen, that Kabyles are no better than dogs and jackals.'

She spoke with pride, and fire flashed from her eyes. She was clearly angry. Le Marchant thought her pride and anger became her.

'I beg your pardon,' he went on in haste, very deferentially raising his hat by pure instinct, for he saw that without any intention of his own he had hurt her feelings. 'I really don't think you quite understood me. I was surprised to find anybody speaking my own tongue here so far in Kabyle.'

'Then you aren't French at all?' the girl asked eagerly, with a flush of expectation.

'No, not French—English; and I'm sorry I seemed, against my will, to annoy you.'

'If you're English we're friends,' the girl answered, looking up at him with a flushed face, as naturally as if she had met with stray Englishmen every day of her life. 'It was my father who taught me to talk like this. I loved my father, and he was an Englishman.'

Le Marchant and Blake both opened their eyes together in mute astonishment.

'And what's your name?' the painter ventured to ask, half dumb with surprise, after a moment's pause.

'My name's Meriem,' the girl replied simply.

'Meriem! Ah, yes, I dare say; that's Kabyle. But your father's?'

'My father's was Yusuf.'

'Yusuf?' Le Marchant cried. 'Why, Yusuf's not English! The English for that, you know, is plain Joseph. Was your father's name Joseph somebody?'

'No,' the girl answered, shaking her head firmly. 'His name was Yusuf. Only Yusuf. His Kabyle name, I mean. And mine's Meriem. In English, Yusuf used always to tell me, it's Mary.'

'But your surname?' Le Marchant suggested, with a smile at her simplicity.

Meriem shook her head once more, with a puzzled look.

'I don't understand that, at all,' she said, with a dubious air. 'I don't know all English. You say some things I don't make out. I never heard that word before—surname.'

'Look here,' Le Marchant went on, endeavouring to simplify matters to her vague little mind. 'Have you any other name at all but Meriem?'

'Yes, I told you—Mary.'

'Ah, of course. I know. But besides that, again. Think; any other?'

The girl looked down with a bewildered glance at her pretty bare feet.

'I'm sure I can't say,' she said, shaking her head. 'I never heard any.'

'But your father had! Surely he must have borne an English name? You must have heard him say it. He's dead, I suppose. But can't you remember?'

‘Yes, Yusuf’s dead, and so’s my mother, and I live with my uncle. My uncle’s the *Amine*, you know, the head of the village.’ And she waved her hand toward him with native gracefulness.

‘Well, what was your father’s English name?’ Le Marchant persisted, piqued by this strange and unexpected mystery, ‘and how did he come to be living here in Algeria?’

‘He *had* an English name, a sort of a double name,’ Meriem answered dreamily, after a moment’s pause, during which it was clear she had been fishing with small success in the very depths of her memory. ‘It was Somebody Something, I remember that. He told me that English name of his, too, one day, and begged me never, never to forget it. It was to be very useful to me. But I was not to tell it to anybody on any account. It was a great secret, and I was to keep it strictly. You see, it was so long ago, more than three years now, and I was so little then. I’ve never spoken this way, ever since Yusuf died, before. And I’ve quite forgotten what the name was that he told me. I only remember his Kabyle name, Yusuf, and his French one, of course—that was Joseph Lebouitillier.’

‘What! he had a French name, too?’ Le Marchant cried, looking up in fresh surprise.

‘Oh yes, he had a French one,’ Meriem answered quietly, as if everyone might be expected to know such simple facts. ‘And that, of course, was what they wanted to shoot him for.’

CHAPTER V.

PROBLEMS.

AT that very moment, before Le Marchant could gratify his curiosity any further, a voice from the crowd of Kabyle bystanders called out sternly, in a commanding tone, ‘Meriem! Ho agha!’ and the girl, with a start, hurried off at the sound into the eager group of her fellow-tribesmen. The crowd gathered round her in hot debate. For awhile, Le Marchant and Blake observed with dismay that their new friend was being closely questioned as to what she her-

self had said in the unknown tongue to the infidel strangers, and what the infidel strangers had said in return with so much apparent kindness to her. Angry glances were cast from time to time in their direction, and voices were raised, and fingers and hands gesticulated fiercely. But after awhile the beautiful girl's calm report seemed somewhat to still the excitement of the indignant Kabyles. She stood before them with outstretched arms and open palms, protesting, as Le Marchant gathered from her eloquent attitude, that these were indeed friends, and not enemies. Her protest prevailed. After a few minutes' interval, she returned once more, with a smiling face, this time accompanied by her uncle, the Headman, and two other Kabyles of evident tribal importance, and the three proceeded to hold an informal palaver with the strangers from Europe, Meriem acting the rôle of interpreter between the two high contracting parties.

The Headman spoke a few words first to the girl, who endeavoured, to the best of her ability, to impart their meaning in English to the attentive new-comers.

'My uncle asks,' she said, 'what you have come for, and why you have brought all these strange things on the ground here with you?'

'My friend is an artist,' Le Marchant answered simply, 'and I am a naturalist, a man of science. We've come to see the mountains and the country, and all that grows in them.'

Meriem shook her head with a gesture of deprecation.

'I don't know these words,' she said. 'Yusuf never used them. I don't know what is an artist and what is a naturalist. Why do you want to see the country?' And she added a few sentences rapidly in Kabyle to the three natives.

Le Marchant saw his mistake at once. The English words he had used were above the girl's simple, childish level. He must come down to her platform. He tried over again.

'My friend paints pictures,' he said, with a smile, holding up a half-finished sketch of Blake's; 'and I shoot birds, and pick up plants and flowers and insects.'

Meriem nodded a satisfied nod of complete comprehension, and reported his speech in Kabyle to her uncle.

'My people say,' she went on again, after a brief colloquy with her three compatriots, 'why do you want so much pencils and paper? Have you come to do good or harm to Kabylie? Does not the pulling out of pencils and paper mean much mischief?'

'Some of the paper is for my friend to paint on,' Le Marchant answered, with the calmness of a man well used to such dealings with suspicious foreigners; 'and part of it is for myself to dry plants and flowers in.'

'My uncle says,' Meriem went on once more, after another short colloquy, 'are you not come to plan out new roads and forts, and will not the Kabyles be forced to work on them, whether they will or whether they will not? Have not the French, who are the enemies of my people, sent you to look if the country is good, so that they may send Frenchmen to take it, and plough it? Did they not make roads the same way to Fort National, and give the land of the Kabyles over there to be ploughed and used by their own soldiers?'

'Explain to your people,' Le Marchant said gently, in his cool way, 'that we are English, like your father; not French, like the people who live at Fort National. We are Yusuf's countrymen. We have nothing to do with the Government at all. We plan no roads, and build no forts. We have only come for our own amusement, to paint the mountains, and to see what flowers and birds live in them.'

'And did you know Yusuf?' Meriem cried excitedly.

'No,' Le Marchant answered, and the girl's face fell sadly at the answer. 'But we are friends, as he was. We wish well to the Kabyles, and all true believers.'

When Meriem had translated and dilated upon these last remarks with her own comments, the Kabyles seemed greatly mollified and reassured. The Headman in particular, with some effusion, seized Le Marchant's hand, and wrung it hard, murmuring many times over fervently, as he did so:

'Ingleez good, French bad; Yusuf Ingleez,' with considerable *empressement*.

'He has picked up a few words of English, you see,' Meriem went on reflectively, 'from hearing me and my father, in the old days, talk so much together.'

It was all so simple and natural to herself that she seemed hardly to realize how strange it sounded in the unaccustomed ears of the two new-comers.

But they had no time just then to gratify their curiosity by making any further investigations or inquiries into the singular mystery of Meriem's antecedents. Strange as the problem was, they must lay it aside unsolved for the present. Evening was coming on, and the practical work of getting things ship-shape in the tent for the night inexorably demanded all their immediate energies. There were the Arabs to be paid, and the mules to be dismissed. Diego, the Mahonnais servant, had still to light a fire of green sticks, and prepare supper; and the two young Englishmen had to make their own beds before they could lie on them, and prepare their quarters generally against the chance of rain or hail, or cold wind, or thunderstorm. Meriem and the three Kabyles, now passively friendly, stopped and looked on with profound interest at all these arrangements. The men, for their part, were too proud to do more than stand and gaze, with many expressions of wonder and surprise—'Allah is great! His works are marvellous!'—at the lamps and etnas, and tin biscuit-boxes, that came forth, one after another, in bewildering array, from the magical recesses of Le Marchant's capacious leather travelling-case. But Meriem, more accustomed to household work, and even to a certain amount of something very like what we in England would call drudgery, lent a willing hand, with womanly instinct, in picking up sticks, and blowing the fire, and helping to lay out the strange metal pans, and plates, and pipkins.

'My people say they're not afraid now,' she remarked, with a gracious smile, to Blake, as she looked up, all glowing, from the fire she was puffing with her own pretty mouth. 'If you're really English, they know you're good, for Yusuf was good, and he was an Englishman. Besides, I've told them I'm sure by your talk you're really English: I know it, because it's just like Yusuf's. The reason they were afraid at first was partly because they thought you were the wicked Frenchmen come to make a road and plant vines, the same as happened to our friends the Beni-Yenni, whom they turned out to die on the mountains. And then they

were displeased, too, because you pitched your tent too near the tomb. They thought that was wrong, because this ground's sacred. Nobody comes here with shoes on his feet. It's the tomb of a Marabout.'

'What's a Marabout?' Blake asked, looking up good-humouredly. He was a handsome young fellow, and his teeth, when he smiled, showed white and even.

'A holy man—I think you call it a priest in English—who served Allah, and read the Koran much; and now that he's dead, he's made into a saint, and our people come to say prayers at his tomb here.'

'But we can shift the tent if you like,' Le Marchant put in eagerly, for he knew how desirable it is in dealing with Mahommedans to avoid shocking, in any way, their fierce and fanatical religious sentiments. 'We thought it was only an ordinary tomb; we'd no idea we were trespassing on a sacred enclosure.'

'Oh no; it doesn't matter now at all,' Meriem answered, with a nod towards the three observant Kabyles. 'Those two men who are standing beside my uncle are Marabouts, too—very holy; and as soon as they heard you were really English, they were quite satisfied, for they loved my father and protected him when the French wanted to catch him and shoot him. They've looked in the Koran, and tried the book; and they say the bones of the just will sleep none the worse for two just men sleeping peaceably beside them.'

'Whoever her father was,' Le Marchant remarked in a low tone to Blake, 'it's clear, anyhow, that he's fortunately predisposed these suspicious Kabyles in favour of his own fellow-countrymen and successors. We're lucky, indeed, to have lighted by accident on probably the only Kabyle village in Algeria where a single soul can speak a word of English. We find an interpreter ready to our hand. I'm glad I trusted, as usual, to chance. My patron goddess has not deserted me.'

'And they say,' Meriem went on, after a few more words interchanged in a low voice with her own people, 'that they'll sell you milk and eggs and flour, and as long as you stop, I may come down here at times, and and explain the things, you know, you want to say to them.'

'Act as interpreter,' Le Marchant suggested quickly.

Meriem's face lighted up with a flash of recognition at the sound.

'Yes, that's the word,' she said. 'I couldn't remember it. Interpret what you say to them. I'd forgotten "interpret."' I expect I've forgotten a great many words. "Translate's" another. I recollect it now. You see, it's so long since I've spoken English.'

'The wonder is that you remember any at all,' Le Marchant answered, with a polite little wave. It was impossible to treat that barefooted Kabyle girl otherwise than as a lady. 'But it'll soon come back now, if you often run down and talk with us at the tent here. We shall want you to help us with the buying and selling.'

'Yusuf would have liked that,' Meriem replied, with a faint sigh. 'He was anxious I should talk often, and shouldn't on any account forget my English.'

Le Marchant was silent. That naïve expression of her natural affection touched him to the heart by its quaint simplicity.

At that moment Diego, looking up from the pan he was holding over the fire with the omelette for supper, called out sharply, '*Viens donc, Mauresque! Donne la main ici! Viens vite, je te dis. Nous te voulons pour nous aider!*'

In a second Meriem drew herself up proudly, for though she did not understand the meaning of the words, or the habitual insolence to the *indigènes* implied in the *tutoiement*, she caught readily enough at the imperiousness of the tone and the rude vulgarity of the gesture that accompanied it. The Kabyles, too, looked on angrily at this interference of a mere European with one of their own women—as who should presume to use their beast of burden without the preliminary politeness of asking them for the loan of it? But Le Marchant intervened with a conciliatory and deferential wave of his hand toward the offended Meriem. 'Overlook it,' he said softly, 'and forgive the fellow's rudeness. He knows no better; he's only a boor; I shall take care to teach him politer manners. Diego,' he went on in French to the Mahonnais, 'if you dare to speak so to this young lady again, remember, you go back that moment to Algiers without your wages. We depend here entirely on

the goodwill of the *indigènes*. Treat her as you would treat a European lady.'

Diego could hardly believe his senses. *Cette demoiselle-ci*, forsooth, of a mere *indigène*! He turned back to the perusal of his peninsular cookery, full of muttered discontent.

'Pigs of natives!' he murmured, half aloud to himself, shredding in some garlic. 'Like a European lady! Things have come to a pretty pass in Algeria, indeed, if we must say *ma'amzelle* to a *canaille* of a *Mauresque*!'

But the Kabyles nodded their hooded heads with a comical air of sagacious triumph.

'They are English, indeed,' the Headman exclaimed aloud in his own tongue to his friends. 'By the staff of the Prophet they are indeed English! Allah be praised that we have seen this day! These are good words! They take the part of a Kabyle girl against a dog of an infidel.'

'We go now,' Meriem said, moving back to her tribesmen, and waving an adieu to the Englishmen with her delicate small hand. 'We know you are friends. Fear no disturbance; this place is yours. We will send you a *cous-cous*.'

'A *cous-cous*! What's that?' Blake asked, turning round to his more experienced companion.

'Oh, just the ordinary native dish, a sort of porridge or macaroni,' Le Marchant answered *sotto voce*. 'It's the customary mark of politeness and recognition to a stranger, like paying a first call, among the Arabs and Kabyles. To send you a *cous-cous* is to make a friend of you. We needn't eat it, you know. It's a sloppy, soppy, pappy mess, even when made by a European, and the native cookery isn't likely to improve it.'

'From her hands,' Blake answered, with unpremeditated enthusiasm, 'I could eat anything, even a dog-biscuit. What luck we're in, Le Marchant! She's a splendid creature—a model of ten thousand! I could hardly take my eyes off her as long as she stopped here.'

Le Marchant gazed round at him with a sharp and hasty glance of inquiry.

'So you've altered your opinion, have you,' he asked wonderingly, 'about the merits and potentialities of these natural Kabyle women?'

'Oh, viewed as a model only, I mean,' Blake corrected

in haste. 'I should love to paint her, of course; she's so splendid as an example of the pure unadulterated human figure. I don't go back one word of what I said otherwise. For wives, I prefer them civilized and educated. But if it comes to that, you must remember, Le Marchant, the girl's at least one half an Englishwoman.'

As he spoke, Meriem, tripping lightly and gracefully up the rocky path above that led by zigzag gradients to her uncle's hut—for it was hardly more—turned round again and waved them a last farewell with that faultless arm of hers. Both young men raised their hats by some inner impulse, as to an English lady. Then the Kabyles turned round a sharp ledge of rock, and left them undisturbed to their supper and their conjectures. Le Marchant, gazing after her, saw a vision of glory. Blake saw but the picture of a Greek goddess, waving her arm, as on some antique vase, to Paris or Endymion.

CHAPTER VI.

MISS KNYVETT EXPLAINS HERSELF.

THAT same afternoon, in London town, where the atmosphere was perhaps a trifle less clear than on the mountains of Kabylie, Thomas Kynnersley Whitmarsh, Q.C., the eminent authority upon probate and divorce cases, was somewhat surprised at receiving an unexpected visit at his own chambers in Old Square, Lincoln's Inn, from his pretty little niece, Iris Knyvett. The Third Classic had by this time got over the first flush and whirl of congratulations and flattery. Her fame had almost begun to pall upon her. The *Times* had had a leader in her honour, of course, and the illustrated papers had engraved her portrait, from which a captious world rejoiced to learn she did not wear blue spectacles. Fogeys, of whom the present writer is one, had croaked in letters to the public press about the danger of the precedent to all her sex; and enthusiastic speakers on ladies' platforms had hailed her success with jubilant whoops as the first dawn of a new era for emancipated womanhood. The Third Classic, in short, had been the talk of the town—a nine days' wonder. But owing to the opportune inter-

vention of a small boy who could play the violin, and a new design for blowing up the Czar in the Summer Palace, the hubbub was beginning to die away a little now, and Iris Knyvett was able to face a trifle more calmly the momentous question of her own future career and place in the universe.

It is a characteristic of the present age that even women have begun at last to develop the rudiments of a social conscience. No longer content to feed like drones at the world's table, giving nothing in return towards the making of the feast save the ornamental effect of their own gracious smiles and pretty faces, they have awoke with a start in these latter days to the sense of a felt need in life—to a consciousness of the want of a definite mission. It was a mission that Iris was now in search of, and it was on the subject of the choice or nature of that proposed mission that she came down dutifully to Old Square that fine afternoon to consult her uncle. This was nice of her ; for, believe me, the higher education has not wholly succeeded in unsexing a woman if she still pretends, in the decorous old fashion, to pay a certain amount of ostensible external deference to the opinions and experience of her male relations.

The eminent Q.C. looked up with surprise from his devil's short notes on a fresh brief, which he was just that moment engaged in skimming. It was a slack afternoon in Old Square, as it happened, and by a sort of minor miracle or special providence Uncle Tom had really half an hour to spare upon his pretty and now distinguished niece ; but, even had it been otherwise, some client's case would surely have fared but scurvily at his hands at such a moment ; for Uncle Tom was fond and proud of Iris, in spite of her heresies, and would have neglected Coleridge, C.J., himself to attend to her slightest whim or fancy.

'God bless my soul, my dear!' he exclaimed, in surprise, rising up from his desk, and pushing his niece with a hearty kiss and a vigorous shove into the one arm-chair (so dusty in the back that Iris, being still, though Third Classic, a woman for all that, trembled inwardly in silence for her nice new best afternoon frock) ; 'what on earth brings a learned lady like you down to Lincoln's Inn at this time of day, eh?'

'Well, uncle,' Iris answered, with modest eyes, 'to tell

you the truth, if I may venture to bother you, I've come down to ask your advice this afternoon about a private matter that greatly concerns me.'

The old barrister rubbed his fat hands together with a distinct glow of inward satisfaction.

'That's right, my dear,' he answered warmly. 'That's the right spirit. The good old spirit. I'm glad to see it, Iris; I'm very glad to see it. I was afraid you'd be too puffed up now even to look at me in the light of an adviser.'

Iris glanced down demurely and smiled.

'Uncle dear,' she said, with womanly softness, 'I hope I shall never be too puffed up to consult you about anything and everything on earth that concerns me. Since dear papa died, I feel you've always been as good as a father to me. You know that as well as I do; only you like to make me tell you again. But are you quite sure, you dear, that I'm not interrupting you?'

The old man's eyes had a gentle glister in them as he took his pretty niece's hand in his tenderly.

'Iris,' he answered, raising it with old-fashioned chivalry to his pursed-up lips (for, short and fat as he was, the eminent Q.C. was an old gentleman of much unsuspected sentiment), 'you never interrupt me, and you never shall. My most litigious client must wait your pleasure. I'm always glad at any time to see you here or elsewhere. My dear, I, who never had a daughter of my own, love you as dearly as if you were my own daughter. I'm only too glad to be of any help to you. I don't think I shall come down here much longer, Iris. The fact is, I'm getting tired of the Bar—its dulness and its hollowness. My boys are well enough provided for now, and I shall never be a judge—I've been far too honest for that—done no dirty work for either party. So there's nothing to keep me with my nose at the grindstone here much longer. I've feathered my nest in spite of 'em, and I shall soon retire; and then I shall have nothing to do in life but to pose as your guardian, guide, philosopher, and friend, Miss Third Classic.'

And he eyed her admiringly. It was very wrong, but he liked his pretty niece all the better for having achieved those academical honours he, nevertheless, felt bound to deprecate,

Iris's eyes fell down once more.

'You're too good, uncle—and you're a darling!' she answered. 'Well, what I wanted to consult you about to-day is just this. Now that I've finished my education——'

Uncle Tom shook his head in vigorous dissent.

'Bad phrase, my dear,' he said, 'bad phrase—very. Too youthful altogether. Betrays inexperience. Nobody ever finished his education yet. Mine goes on still. It's in progress daily. Each new case teaches me something. And the judges teach me, if nothing else, contempt of Court daily.'

Iris accepted the correction in good part.

'Well, then,' she went on, with a pretty smile, 'now that I've completed my University course——'

'Much better,' the old man muttered: 'much better; much better. Though not feminine.'

'I want to begin some work in life—something that will do good in some way to others—something that will make me feel I'm being of use to the world in my generation.'

Uncle Tom sniffed high.

'In short,' he said, with a pitying smile, 'a mission.'

Iris smiled in return, in spite of herself.

'Well, yes,' she good-humouredly murmured, 'if you choose to put it so, just that—a mission.'

Uncle Tom rose and went over without a word to a small tin box on a shelf opposite, conspicuously labelled, in large white letters, 'Estate of the late Rev. Reginald Knyvett.' From the box he took out a few papers and parchments, and from among them he soon selected one, tied round with a neat little tag of red tape, and marked on the back in a round legal hand, 'Descendants of the late Rear-Admiral William Clarence Knyvett, C.B.' He handed this formidable document over with a little silent bow to Iris, and seating himself then at his own desk, proceeded with uplifted pen in hand to address her, as jury, on the question at issue.

'My dear,' he said, in so forensic a tone that Iris half expected 'My Lud, I mean,' to follow, 'you must remember that you have already a mission cut out for you, and a mission for which it is your bounden duty as a citizen and a Christian most strenuously to prepare yourself. I know, of course, the sort of thing you had in your head. Come, now,' and he assumed his cross-examining tone, with a dig

of his quill in the direction of the unwilling witness; 'confess you were thinking of being a nurse in a hospital.'

Iris blushed a guilty acquiescence.

'Well, either that,' she answered grudgingly, 'or a tutorship or lectureship at some ladies' college.'

'Precisely so,' Uncle Tom responded, with a crushing triumph. 'I knew as much. I was morally certain of it. It's always so. Young women in search of a mission nowadays have two ideas, and two ideas only—nursing or teaching. They want to turn the world into one vast hospital or one vast boarding-school. They'd like us all to break our legs, or go into the Fourth Form again, that they might exercise their vocation by bandaging us up with ambulance shreds and list, or giving us lectures at great length on political economy. Now the fact is, Iris, that's all very well for plain young women of limited means, whom nobody's ever likely to think of marrying. Let them exercise their vocation by all means, if they like it, provided always they don't expect me to break my leg to please them, or listen to their lectures on political economy. I draw a line there; no Mill or Ricardo. . . But you, my dear, will have a great fortune. Somebody worthy of you will some day marry you—if anybody worthy of you exists anywhere. Now, to dispense that great fortune aright, to use it for the best good of humanity, you ought to be otherwise engaged than in bandaging, I think. Your main work in life will be, not to bandage, but to fulfil the part of a good wife and good mother. I may be old-fashioned in thinking thus, perhaps; I may even be indelicate, since women nowadays are too delicate to face the facts of life—but, at any rate, I'm practical. These views are not the views in vogue at Girton, I'm aware, but they're common-sense—they're common-sense, for all that. The species won't die out because you've got the higher education. What then? You ought to be trying to prepare yourself for your duties in life—the duties in life that will naturally devolve upon you as the mistress, dispenser, and transmitter of a Great Property.'

The last two words Uncle Tom pronounced with peculiar unction, for property in his eyes was something almost sacred in its profound importance.

‘But how do I know?’ Iris objected faintly, ‘that Uncle Arthur will leave his money to me at all? Let alone the odious idea of waiting and watching till you come into somebody else’s fortune.’

‘How do you know?’ Uncle Tom repeated, with a sudden explosion of virtuous indignation. ‘Just look at that paper you hold in your hand, and I’ll explain the whole thing to you, as clear as mud, in half a second. He’d hardly dare to leave it otherwise, I tell you, with *me* against him. I’d like to see him try, that’s all, Iris. Just cast your eye on the paper in your hand, and recollect that your grandfather, the Admiral—like a green bay-tree—had five sons—his quiver full of them. Five sons. Alexander, the squire, never married; Clarence, the scapegrace—the less said about Clarence the better; Sir Arthur, the general, whose wife pre-deceased him; Reginald, the parson, your father, my dear, and a better man never breathed, though he married my sister; and, lastly, Charles, that rascally lawyer, who has issue your cousin Harold. Well, your grandfather was ill-advised enough, though not a lawyer, to draw up his own will himself—a thing even I would hardly venture to do, with all my knowledge; “but fools rush in,” etc., etc. As always happens in such cases, he drew it up badly, very badly—the Nemesis of the amateur—used technical terms he didn’t understand, and omitted to explain his intentions clearly. Now, he left the property in the first instance, for life only, to your uncle Alexander, the eldest son, as you see by that paper—but you’re not looking at it. Alexander, you observe, is there set down as *d. s. p.*—*decessit sine prole*—which I need hardly say to a Third Classic means that he died without lawful issue.’

‘I see,’ Iris answered, endeavouring to assume an interested expression, for the technicalities of the law failed to arouse in her the same enthusiasm as in the eminent authority on probate and divorce cases.

‘Well, by the terms of the will in that case made and provided,’ Uncle Tom went on, with demonstrative forefinger, ‘the property was next to go for life to your uncle Clarence, provided he outlived your uncle Alexander. Clarence, who was to have power of appointment if he died with issue, was, as you will remember, an officer of Hussars,

and, not to put too fine a point upon it, he disappeared under a cloud, getting killed abroad in the French service, in which he had enlisted, *before*, mark you, *before* the death of your uncle Alexander, who deceased at Bath on April 4, 1883, without lawful issue. So that, so far as this present question is concerned, we may safely leave Clarence out of consideration. *Mortuus est sine prole*—he died without lawful issue of his body begotten, killed in action in foreign parts, on or about June 20, *anno domini* 1868, and has no further interest in this present inquiry.'

'I see,' Iris once more made answer, dutifully stifling a yawn.

'Well, then, and in that case,' Uncle Tom went on, with forensic quill pointed firmly towards her, 'the property was to devolve on the third brother, your uncle Arthur—you see him down there, Major-General Sir Arthur Wellesley Knyvett, K.C.B.—no doubt, as your grandfather fondly expected, on the same terms as his elder brothers. And Sir Arthur, in fact, as you well know, is now and at present the actual holder. But then, and this is *highly* important, your grandfather omitted, in Arthur's case, to insert the limiting clause he had elsewhere used for his other children, and left, by implication, your uncle Arthur (purely by accident, I don't for a moment doubt) full power to bequeath it to whomever he chose, whether he had issue living or otherwise. And that power,' Uncle Tom continued, with a vicious snap of his jaw, 'your uncle Arthur now and always lays claim to exercise.'

'Then how am I to know,' Iris asked, with a shudder, scarcely overcoming her natural objection to ask such a question, 'that Uncle Arthur means to exercise it in my favour?'

'Because,' Uncle Tom answered, with a wise air of exclusive knowledge, 'I have let him know privately, through a safe medium, that he daren't do otherwise. The terms of the will, in the latter part, are so vague and contradictory that nobody but I can understand them, and I can make them mean anything I like, or everything, or nothing. Your grandfather then goes on to provide, after allowing your uncle Arthur to do as he will—so far as I can read his ungrammatical sentences—that in case your uncle Arthur dies

without issue, the money shall go to the fourth son, the Rev. Reginald Knyvett, deceased, who married my sister, Amelia Whitmarsh; or, in case of his pre-decease, to his lawful issue, who, as you will see from the paper before you, and are, indeed, perhaps already aware, is Iris Knyvett, of Girton College, Cambridge, spinster, here present.'

'I suspected as much already,' Iris answered, smiling.

'Last of all on that paper, you will observe,' Uncle Tom remarked, growing suddenly severe and red in face, as was his wont in dealing with a specially awkward and damaging witness, 'comes the name of the fifth and youngest son, that rascally lawyer, Charles Wilberforce Knyvett. Now, your late uncle, Charles Wilberforce Knyvett, for some unknown reason, was never in any way a favourite with his father. In fact, the Admiral profoundly disliked him. People say the old gentleman in his latter days thought his youngest son a sneak and a cur (which was unhappily true), and harboured a peculiar grudge against him. At any rate, he is conspicuously omitted from any benefit under the will, or, rather, it is provided in so many words that after all these lives have run out, the property shall *not* descend to Charles Wilberforce Knyvett, his heirs, executors, or assigns, but shall be diverted to another branch of the family, to the total exclusion of your uncle Charles and his sole issue, your cousin Harold.'

'Then Uncle Arthur couldn't leave the property to Harold, even if he wanted to?' Iris asked, somewhat languidly, but with a resolute desire, since her uncle wished it, to master the intricacies of this difficult problem in the law of inheritance.

'*He* says he can, but *I* say he can't,' Uncle Tom answered, with a glow of righteous triumph. 'I've tried the will by all the precedents, and all I've got to say is this—I'd just like to see him try it.' And Uncle Tom unconsciously assumed the attitude of defence familiar to the patrons of the British prize-ring.

'That's a pity,' Iris answered, looking him straight in the face; 'and it seems somehow awfully unfair; for Uncle Arthur's so fond of Harold, you know; and he's never seen *me* since I was a baby in swaddling-clothes.'

Uncle Tom laid down his glasses on his desk with a

bounce. 'God bless my soul!' he cried, in a paroxysm of astonishment. 'Is the girl cracked? Has much learning made her mad at Girtton? Going to play into your enemy's hand, eh, and chuck up a fortune of six thousand a year, all for the sake of a piece of sentiment! No, no: thank heaven I know the law; and not a single penny of the Admiral's property shall that scoundrel Harold ever touch or handle. Not a doit, not a cent, not a sou, not a stiver. He won't, and he shan't, so that's all about it!'

CHAPTER VII.

ART AND NATURE.

IN a very few days Eustace Le Marchant and Vernon Blake had settled down comfortably to their respective pursuits on the wind-swept summit of the mountain of the Beni-Merzoug. The simple-hearted Kabyles, as soon as they were quite convinced that the new-comers were neither French spies nor agricultural pioneers sent out to spread the concomitant blessings of civilization and confiscation of land, welcomed the young Englishmen with most cordial hospitality to their lonely hill-tops. Their courtesy, in fact, seemed likely at first to prove, if anything, a trifle too pressing; for almost every family in the village insisted on sending a *cous-cous* in turn, in polite recognition of the new visitors. Now, Meriem's *cous-cous*, much to the Englishmen's ingenuous surprise, prepared as it was by those dainty and dexterous fingers, had turned out upon tasting a triumphant success; but the *cous-couses* which succeeded it, and all of which politeness compelled the inhabitants of the camp to devour in public to the uttermost morsel before their entertainers' eyes, were far from attaining the same high level of primitive cookery. Deft fingers count for much even in the smallest matters. Meriem herself, indeed, was of infinite use to them in arranging supplies; and her uncle the headman, with his friends the marabouts, gave them every facility for shooting and sketching, and hunting specimens throughout the whole country-side for miles in either direction.

On the first morning after their arrival in the hills, Blake strolled out by himself, with sketch-book in hand, for a walk through the village, while Le Marchant was busy unpacking and arranging his bird-stuffing and beetle-preserving apparatus. To Vernon Blake, the village was indeed a fresh world of untold enjoyment. The rough-built houses, with their big stone walls and tile-covered roofs; the broad eaves projecting over the open courtyard, and supported by rude wooden Ionic columns; the tall lithe men with their simple but picturesque and effective garb, their bronzed features, and their long oval faces; the women at the fountain with water-jars on their heads, walking stately and erect, with exquisite busts and rounded limbs, just peeping through the graceful folds of their hanging *chiton*—each and all of these suggested to his soul endless subjects for innumerable pictures, where girls of this exquisite Italian type might form the figures in the foreground, exactly suited to his sympathetic pencil. He had come to the very right place for his art. Models crowded upon him spontaneously at every corner.

A turn of the road near the headman's cottage brought him suddenly, with a start, face to face with Meriem herself, engaged on a little flat platform, with a group of Kabyle girls of her own age, in moulding coarse vases of hand-made pottery. Blake, with his soft-soled white-linen shoes, came upon them so noiselessly and unexpectedly that for half a minute the girls themselves, intent upon their work, never so much as perceived the presence of a stranger. The artist, drawing back, for fear he might disturb them, drank in the whole group with unspoken delight. He paused on the path a little above where they stood, and looked down, all interest, upon that unstudied picture. The graceful Kabyle maidens in their simple loose dress, with feet bare to the ankle, were stooping picturesquely over the jars they were moulding, in unconscious attitudes of grace and beauty. Some of them were bareheaded, others wore on their hair a sort of pointed fez, or Phrygian kaftan, which half confined, half let loose to the wind, their raven-black locks. The jars, in shape like an old Roman amphora, were poised upon the ground by means of a little round mud base; the naive young potters, each full of her own task, and unmindful of

the others, built up the big vessels stage after stage by adding on loose handfuls of moist and flattened clay to the half-finished outline. They were evidently ignorant of the use of the wheel—so remote and unsophisticated are these wild mountain-people—yet the shapes which grew slowly under their moulding fingers were each almost perfect of their own simple kind, and bore each the distinct and unmistakable impress of an individual fancy. It was pretty to see them stooping, thus unconscious, over the wet vases of yellow clay, with one hand inside supporting and modelling the freshly-added portion, while the other without was employed in smoothing it, and shaping the whole, by dexterous side-pressure, to the required roundness.

Blake would have pulled out his pencil on the spot, and sketched them roughly in their attitudes, all unwitting as they stood, had not one little fair-haired and blue-eyed maiden, of that almost Scandinavian type so common here and there in Kabyle villages, looked laughingly up from her two-handled jar, and caught his eye on a sudden with a frightened little scream of shyness and astonishment. An infidel was standing there, gazing upon them unseen. 'A stranger! A stranger!' At the sound, all the others started up in concert, and in a moment all was giggling and blushing confusion. So strange a visitor never before had disturbed their peace. Some of the girls held their hands to their faces like wayward children to hide their blushes: others fell back a pace or two in startled haste under the overhanging eaves of the headman's cottage. Who could say what designs the infidel might harbour? Meriem alone raised herself erect, and gazed the painter fairly in the face with the frank self-possession of a European lady.

Blake lifted his hat as instinctively as before, for he felt her presence; and Meriem, in reply, raised her hand, with a wave, to the level of her face, in an easy and graceful natural salutation.

'Good-morning, mademoiselle,' the artist said gaily, in high spirits at the scene and its pictorial capabilities.

'Good-morning, friend,' Meriem answered quickly, a slight shade passing, as she spoke, over her open countenance. 'But why do you call me mademoiselle, if you please? I'm not a Frenchwoman, as you seem to think me.'

Blake saw she was evidently annoyed at the politely-meant title.

‘I called you mademoiselle,’ he said apologetically, ‘because I wanted to call you something, and, as I suppose you’re a French citizen, I didn’t know what else on earth to call you.’

‘Why not call me by my name, as everyone else does?’ the beautiful barbarian answered simply. ‘I’m just Meriem to all the village.’

Blake was a little taken aback at the startling proposal. So much familiarity fairly took his breath away. This was indeed to rush *in medias res* with undue precipitancy.

‘Am I to say Meriem, then?’ he inquired rather low, with natural bashfulness.

‘What else should you say?’ Meriem answered naïvely. ‘Don’t people call one another by their names everywhere?’

‘Why, yes,’ Blake answered, with some little hesitation, ‘but not by their Christian names, you know—at least, in England—except as a mark of special favour and close intimacy.’

‘Meriem is *not* a Christian name,’ the girl answered hastily, almost indignantly, ‘and I’m not a Christian; I’m a true believer.’

‘But your father was a Christian,’ Blake ventured to reply, astonished at the unwonted tone of her disclaimer; ‘and you told us yesterday your English name at least was Mary.’

‘My father was no Christian!’ Meriem cried aloud, with flashing eyes and fiery indignation. ‘People in the village accused him of that sometimes, I know, but it was never true; I’m sure it was never true, for Yusuf was kinder and better than anyone—no infidel could ever be as kind as that. He was a good Moslem, and he read the Koran, and prayed at the tombs, and went to mosque like the rest on Fridays regularly. He was a true man, and everyone loved him. No one shall say a word before me against my father. As to my name, why, Mary and Meriem’s all the same, of course; and I was called, so the women in the village say, after the name of the mother of Aissa-ben-Meriem. But Moslems, too, honour him as a very great prophet, you know, though not so great, naturally, as our own Prophet Mahommed.’

Blake hardly understood her meaning to the full, for his

acquaintance with her creed was strictly confined to 'The Arabian Nights' and 'The Revolt of Islam'; but it gave him a little shock of surprise and horror to hear anyone, and especially a woman, so indignantly repel the imputations of Christianity. Yet a moment's reflection served to show him, though by no means a philosophically-minded or cosmopolitan young man, that in such surroundings nothing else would have been natural, or even possible. Meriem, no doubt, had never heard Christians spoken of before except with the profoundest scorn and detestation of the Faithful. It hardly even occurred to her simple mind that her hearer himself, infidel as he was, could think seriously well of them, or regard them as the equals of true believers.

He turned the conversation, accordingly, of set purpose. 'You all looked so pretty,' he said, 'as I came along the path, bending over your jars and modelling your pottery, that I was longing in my heart to stand still and study you. I wanted to sketch you all just as you stood there.'

'To *what*?' Meriem cried, with a little start of dismay; an unknown word encloses for a woman such infinite possibilities.

'To sketch you, you know,' Blake repeated reassuringly. 'To put you in my book like this, you see. To make a little picture of you.'

Meriem laughed, a sweet, frank laugh, as she turned the pages of his book with wondering eyes. 'That would be nice,' she said. 'They're pretty things, these. But would it be *right*, I wonder? All good Moslems are forbidden, you know, by the Prophet's law, to make a picture or image of anything in heaven or earth or the water under them. There are no pictures anywhere in any of the mosques. Would the marabouts think it was right for us to be painted?'

'But I'm not a Moslem, you see,' Blake replied, smiling, with ready professional casuistry. 'And all that you've got to do yourselves, you know, is just to stand leaning as you were over your pottery, and allow me to commit the sin of sketching you on my own account. It won't hurt *me*: I'm a hardened offender. Ask the other girls, there's a good soul, whether they'll come back as they were and let me sketch them.'

'And are the other girls to be put in the picture, too?'

Meriem asked, looking up, with a faint undertone of disapprobation.

‘Certainly,’ Blake replied, without perceiving the slight inflection of disappointment in her voice. ‘Now go, there’s a good girl, and make them come back and stand nicely as I tell them.’

‘My father used to say that, “Now go, there’s a good girl,”’ Meriem answered, with a faint rising flush of pleasure; and, pleased at the word, she went off at once to do as he directed her. He had stirred an old chord in her simple nature.

In half a dozen minutes Blake had got two sitters, with a little coaling and manual posing, which they seemed to resent far less than European girls would have done under the circumstances, into tolerable order for his proposed study. At first, to be sure, he had no little difficulty in getting them to keep for five seconds together to one posture or attitude. They seemed to think it a matter of supreme indifference whether a face begun at one angle should be continued at the same or a totally unlike one. But with some small trouble, by Meriem’s aid, and with the magnificent promise of untold wealth in the shape of a silver half-franc apiece visibly dangled before their astonished eyes, he succeeded at last in inducing each girl to maintain something like a consistent attitude; at least, while he was engaged upon his first rough sketch of her own particular face and figure. The guileless damsels, dazzled at the prospect of such unexpected wealth, would have sat there all day as still as mice for so magnificent a payment; but at the end of an hour or two Blake dismissed them all with mutual satisfaction to their various homes, and prepared himself to return in excellent spirits to the tent with his prize for luncheon. ‘That ought to fetch them,’ he murmured to himself, as he surveyed his own dainty and unaffected sketch with parental partiality.

‘Now, Meriem, you’ve done more for me to-day than all the rest of them put together. You must have a whole franc yourself for your share in the proceedings.’ And he held that vast store of potential enjoyment, proffered in a single shining coin, between his delicate thumb and opposing forefinger.

Meriem had never possessed so much money in her life

before; but she drew her hand back from him with a startled gesture, and held it like a child behind her back with an unsophisticated expression of offended dignity. 'Oh no,' she answered, blushing crimson to the neck; 'I could never take that! Please don't ask me again. I'm glad if I was able to help you with your picture. Though, of course, it was wrong of us to let you draw us.'

Blake saw at a glance that she really meant it, and with the innate courtesy of a gentleman refrained at once from pressing the obnoxious coin any further upon the girl's unwilling notice. He replaced the franc quietly in his waistcoat pocket, and said as he did so, in an unconcerned voice, to turn the current of both their thoughts, 'I suppose the other girls will go off with their money to get themselves something at the shops in the village.'

'At the what?' Meriem asked, with a look of bewilderment.

'At the shops,' Blake answered, in a jaunty tone. 'I suppose you've got shops of some sort or other in this benighted country.'

'I don't know what you mean,' Meriem answered, shaking her head vigorously. 'I never heard of them. Shops, did you say? I don't think we've got any—unless it's cakes; but if I only knew exactly what you meant, and could say it in Kabyle, I'd ask my uncle.'

Blake laughed a laugh of unaffected amusement. It seemed so odd to be talking to somebody in his own tongue—and so familiarly, too—who had never even so much as heard what sort of thing a shop was. 'Why, where do you buy things?' he asked curiously. 'Where do you get the food and utensils, and so on, that you're in want of?'

'We make them, or grow them mostly, of course,' Meriem answered quickly (everything, it seemed, was 'of course' to Meriem, because her experience had all been so limited, and so uncontradicted); 'but when we want to buy things from other tribes, we go down and get them with money at the markets. Or sometimes we exchange a goat or a chicken. There's a market one day of the week, but I don't remember its English name—the day after Friday—here with us at Beni-Merzoug; and there are others on other days at neighbouring villages, sometimes one and sometimes another. And that's where we always go to buy things.'

Blake smiled to himself a smile of amused superiority. To think that Le Marchant should have talked seriously, from a marrying point of view, about a girl who had never even heard of shopping! And yet in more civilized European climes many a good man would be heartily glad to find himself a wife on whose innocent mind—but on second thoughts I refrain from making any nasty reflections.

He shut up his sketch-book, and rose to leave. Meriem looked after him with a look of regret. How wonderful that a man should be able to make pictures like that! They seemed to live and breathe, she fancied. She had hardly ever seen a picture at all before, except a few coarse French lithographs bought by the villagers at Tizi-Ouzou. But she had never been as far as Tizi-Ouzou even, herself. Her narrow little experience was bounded hard and fast by her own mountain peak and its adjacent valleys.

And how beautiful he looked when he turned and smiled at her!

But Blake went away and thought of nothing. He showed his sketch to Le Marchant in high spirits when he reached the tent. Le Marchant's face fell as he looked at it.

'So you've been drawing Meriem!' he said. 'You've found her out already! A very pretty picture. You ought to work it up into something very good! It's life-like, and therefore of course it's beautiful. . . But you've been with Meriem all the morning, while I've been unpacking my goods and chattels. I wondered she hadn't been up here before to visit us.'

CHAPTER VIII.

NO SOUL.

For the next week or so the two young Englishmen were busy enough hunting and sketching all day long among the fresh ground they had thus successfully broken for themselves in the North African Highlands. Le Marchant spent much of his time up among the jagged peaks and bare rocks of the mountains, happy enough if he returned at night with a specimen of 'that rare and local bird, the Algerian tit-

mouse,' or with a snail as big as a pin's head, 'a perfect treasure, you know, my dear fellow, hitherto only known to science in the mountains of Calabria and in the Albanian Highlands.' Zeal for his great work on 'Structure and Function' had swallowed him up, and gave zest and importance to the minutest find in beetles or gadflies.

Blake, on the other hand, loitered much more around the precincts of the village itself and the cultivated plots that hung along the narrow ledges of the hillside; for his quarry was man, and he loved to drink his fill of that idyllic life, so purely Arcadian in its surviving simplicity, that displayed itself with such charming frankness and unconcern before his observant eyes each sunny morning. It was the artist's Greece revived for his behoof; the Italy of the Georgics in real life again. The labourer leaning hard on his wooden plough, the yoke of mountain oxen that tugged it through the ground, the women at the well with their coarse, hand-made jars, the old men chatting under the shade of the ash-trees beside the tiny mosque, all afforded him subjects for innumerable studies. He beheld before his face a Virgilian eclogue for ever renewing itself; and the young painter, who had never read his Eclogues in the Latin at all; could appreciate whatever was most vivid and picturesque in the life of these simple idyllic mountaineers with an eye as keen in its way as Virgil's own had been.

Meriem, too, often came up in the evenings to the tent in her capacity as interpreter; and Le Marchant, who could see and admire strong traits of character wherever he found them, soon learnt to read in the Kabyle-bred girl, with her open mind and serene intelligence, many marks of fine and sterling qualities. But he could gather little further by all his inquiries about the mystery of her origin. All that Meriem herself could tell him of her parentage was simply this—Yusuf had a French name as well as an English and a Kabyle one; and if his French name had ever leaked out, the people at Fort National would have taken him and shot him. Le Marchant, indeed, was just at first inclined to consider the beautiful girl's father was a runaway convict!

Inquiries directed through Meriem's mouth to her uncle the Amine were met in a distinctly reserved spirit. It seemed as though the old Kabyle was afraid even now of

betraying the dead man's secret—if, indeed, he had one, or if the Amine knew it. Perhaps these English might be in league with the infidel French, after all, and might be plotting harm against himself and his tribesmen—else why should they thus minutely inquire about the girl's antecedents? A mere girl; why bother their heads with her? Yusuf was dead; let him sleep in peace where good Moslems had laid him. All that the Amine could or would tell them amounted in the end simply to this—that Meriem's father had come to them as a guest after a great battle in a local insurrection (one of those petty risings, no doubt, in which the tribes of Kabylie are for ever striving to reassert their independence of French authority); that he was a good man, who loved the Kabyles; that he wore the native dress, and lived as the tribe lived; that he was a faithful Moslem and a clever hunter—considerations apparently of equal importance in the eyes of the villagers; that he had married the Amine's sister, Meriem's mother, long since dead, according to the rites and ceremonies of the Kabyle people; and that he had died by falling over a ledge of rock three years back, while wandering by himself under unexplained circumstances among the high mountains. So much the Amine, bit by bit, suspiciously admitted. With that scanty information, no more being forthcoming, Le Marchant for the present was forced to content himself.

Blake, on the other hand, with his more easy-going and pleasure-loving artistic temperament, troubled himself little about all these things. Gallio that he was, it sufficed him to sit in the shade of the chestnuts and paint Meriem as the foreground figure in almost all his pictures, rather than to indulge in otiose speculations as to her possible ancestry and problematical parentage. 'She's a first-rate model,' he said, 'whoever her father may be. King Cophetua's beggar-maid could never have been lovelier.' And that contented him. He wanted only to find physical beauty. So he got to work soon on studies for a large canvas, with Meriem in the centre, her water-jar poised with queenly grace upon her stately head; and he was well satisfied to sketch in her shapely chin and throat without any remote genealogical inquiries to distract his mind from the exquisite curve on her neck and shoulders.

‘But if you’re going to give me regular sittings, Meriem, he said to her seriously one morning under the chestnuts, venturing to broach once more the tabooed subject, ‘you must really let me pay you so much a day, because I shall want you, of course, for so many hours every morning regularly, and it’ll take you away altogether at times from your household duties.’

‘My aunt can do those,’ Meriem answered quietly, shaking her head. ‘I like to sit for you; it gives me pleasure. I like to see these beautiful pictures growing up so curiously under your hands. It’s almost like magic.’

‘Thank you,’ the Englishman answered. ‘That’s very kind of you. Praise from your lips, Meriem, is worth a great deal to me.’

He said it lightly, with a smile and a bow, as a commonplace of politeness, for to him the words meant very little. But to Meriem, who had never heard women treated with ordinary Western chivalry before, they were full of profound and delicious meaning; they struck some unknown heart-string deep down in her being. She blushed up to her eyes (a good moment for a painter; Blake seized it gratefully), and then relapsed for awhile into joyful silence.

‘Yes, yes! just so!’ Blake cried, stopping her on a sudden, with both his hands uplifted in warning, as she fell naturally into one of her easy, graceful Hellenic attitudes. ‘That’s just how I want you; don’t move a muscle—you’re beautiful that way. It shows off your arm and head and the pose of your neck to such absolute perfection. You’re prettier than ever like that, I declare, Meriem.’

Meriem, all conscious of herself for the first time in her life, stood as he directed her, without moving a line. She could have stood there for ever, indeed, with Blake to paint her.

The artist went on without noticing her emotion.

‘Don’t let my uncle know,’ she said, after a short pause, with some slight embarrassment, and hesitating as she spoke, ‘that you offered—that you wanted—to give me money for sitting.’

‘I won’t,’ Blake answered, laughing; ‘I can promise you that. With my present knowledge of his language, indeed,

I should find it difficult.' He played with his brush—dab, dab, on the canvas. 'But why not, Meriem?'

The girl blushed again.

'Because—he would take it,' she answered simply.

Blake smiled and nodded, but said nothing.

They were standing outside the village on the open space in front of the tiny whitewashed mosque, and men and women came past frequently, and paused to look, with clicks of surprise or interest or approbation, at the portrait on the easel, as Blake sat and painted it. Presently, a young Kabyle of handsome form and well-made features came up in his turn, and looked, like the others; then he turned round sharply, and spoke for awhile, with a somewhat earnest air, to Meriem; and, as Blake imagined, there was audible in his tone some undercurrent of imperious and angry expostulation.

'Who's that?' the Englishman asked, looking up with a quick glance from his seat on the rock as the Kabyle turned on his heel and retired, half haughtily.

'That's Ahmed,' Meriem answered, in the same 'of course' style of conversation as usual, as if everybody must needs know all her fellow-villagers.

'And who's Ahmed?' the painter went on, still working steadily at the flesh-tints of the shoulder.

'The man who's going to marry me,' Meriem answered, in just as quiet and matter-of-fact a voice as that in which she would have told him the price of spring chickens.

Blake started back in almost speechless surprise.

'That man marry you!' he cried, with a toss of his handsome head. 'Why, he's nothing but a common Kabyle mule-driver. What impudence! What presumption! And do you love him, Meriem?'

'No,' Meriem answered, in the same calm and downright voice, without the slightest attempt at concealing her feelings in that particular.

'Then why on earth are you going to marry him?' Blake asked, astonished.

'Because my uncle has agreed to sell me to him,' Meriem said simply. 'As soon as Ahmed's earned money enough to buy me, my uncle's going to let him have me cheap. Perhaps Ahmed 'll have saved enough by the next olive

harvest. He's offered my uncle a very fair price: he's going to give him a patch of land and two hundred francs for me.

Blake was genuinely shocked and surprised at this painful disclosure. In spite of his contempt for barbaric women, he felt instinctively already that Meriem was far too much of an English girl at heart to be bought and sold like a sheep or a chattel. He explained to her, briefly, in simple words, that in England such means of arranging marriages were not openly countenanced by either law or custom; indeed, with a generous disregard of plain facts—allowable, perhaps, under the peculiar circumstances—he avoided all reference to settlements or jointures, and boldly averred, with pardonable poetic license, that Englishwomen always bestowed their hearts and hands on the man of their choice who seemed to them most worthy of their young affections.

'That's a beautiful way,' Meriem murmured reflectively, after the handsome painter had dilated with enthusiasm for a few minutes on the purity and nobility of our English marriage system. 'That's a lovely way. I should like that ever so much. I wish for some things I had been born in England. Although you're all infidels, you have some good ways there. But here, in Kabylie, of course, I must follow in all things the Kabyle custom.'

'So you mean to obey, and to marry Ahmed?' Blake asked, half shocked, but continuing to work at the elbow and forearm.

'What else can I do?' Meriem asked, looking up with a quiet sigh. 'I can't refuse to go where my uncle bids me.'

'But how can you find it in your soul?' Blake began, half indignantly.

'I've got no soul,' Meriem interrupted, in a perfectly serious voice. 'We Mussulman women are born without any.'

'Well, soul or no soul, wouldn't you much prefer,' Blake went on with fire, warming up to his subject, 'instead of marrying that fellow with the mules, who'll probably abuse you, and overwork you, and beat you, and ill-treat you, to marry some Englishman with a heart and a head, who'd love you well, and be proud of your beauty, and delight in

decking you out in becoming dress, and be to you a friend, and a shield, and a lover, and a protector?"

A bright light burned for a moment like flame in Meriem's eyes; then she cast them down to the ground, and her bosom heaved, as she answered slowly, in a very low voice, 'No Kabyle ever spoke to a woman like that. They don't know how. It's not in their language. But Yusuf used to speak to me often that way. And he loved my mother, and was, oh! so kind to her, till the day she died. I think you English, infidels as you are, must be in some ways a blessed people; so different from the French—the French are wicked. It's a pity the English aren't true believers.'

Her heart was beating visibly through her robe now. Blake felt he had said a little too much, perhaps, for he meant nothing more than the merest flirtation; so he turned the subject with a careless smile to the get-up of the picture.

'I'm going on to your hand and wrist next, Meriem,' he said, with a wave, rising up to pose her fingers exactly as he wanted them. 'Look here, this locket round your neck's in the way. Couldn't you take it off? It spoils the natural folds of your drapery, and incommodes the hand so.'

It was a small square charm, in shape like a tiny box or book, made of coarse silver work, inlaid with enamel, and relieved by bosses of lapis-lazuli, and other cheap stones, such as all Kabyle women wear, as an amulet hung round their necks to protect them from the evil eye, and other misfortunes.

"With coral clasps and amber studs,"

Blake murmured to himself, as he looked at it closely. He laid his hand upon it with a gesture of apology, and a 'Will you permit me, Meriem?'—meaning to remove it by passing the chain over her head and kaftan. But the girl, with a sudden convulsive effort of both her hands, clasped it hard and tight to her bosom.

'Oh no,' she cried, 'not that; not that, please! You must never take *that*. I couldn't possibly allow you. You mustn't even touch it. It's very precious. You must keep your hands off it.'

'Is it something, then, so absolutely sacred?' Blake asked, half laughingly, and suspecting some curious Mahommedan superstition.

‘Yes, more than sacred,’ Meriem answered, low. ‘It was Yusuf who hung it there when he was going away, and he told me often, with tears in his eyes, never to let anybody lay hands upon it anywhere. And nobody ever shall, till I die with it on my neck. For Yusuf’s sake it shall always hang there. When I’ve borne a son’—she said it so simply that Blake hardly noticed the unconventional phrase—‘the Kabyle custom is to wear the charm, for an honour, on the forehead. But I shall never move mine from my neck at all, though the women may laugh at me. I shall wear it for ever where my father hung it.’

The painter, abashed, held his peace at once, and asked her no more. He saw she felt too deeply on the subject to make it either wise or kind for him to interfere with her feeling.

That evening at the tent, as he sat with Le Marchant, stuffing birds and pinning out butterflies, Meriem came up with a message from the Amine about some domestic trifle of milk-supply or goat-mutton. Le Marchant was glad to see her, too, for he wanted to ask her a favour for himself. Perhaps he was jealous that his handsome lodger should monopolize so large a portion of the beautiful Kabyle girl’s time and attention; perhaps, being by nature of a studious turn, he was genuinely anxious to make the best of his linguistic opportunities. At any rate, he wanted to inquire of Meriem whether she would give him lessons in the evening in the Kabyle language. Meriem laughed. She was perfectly ready to do her best, she said, provided always the lessons were given with all publicity on the platform outside the Amine’s cottage.

‘For our Kabyle men,’ she added, with her transparent simplicity, ‘are very jealous, you know—very, very jealous. They would never allow me to come here to teach you. If I came without leave, they would stick knives into me.’

‘And may I learn, too?’ the painter asked, with his sunny smile.

‘Yes, Blake, certainly,’ Meriem answered at once, with natural politeness.

Both the men laughed. From that stately and beautiful girl’s lips the mannish colloquialism sounded irresistibly funny.

‘You mustn’t say “Blake,”’ the painter exclaimed, in answer to Meriem’s startled look of mute inquiry at their unexpected merriment.

‘But Le Marchant always calls you Blake,’ Meriem objected, much puzzled. ‘In England, don’t people think it right for women to call men by their own names, then?’

‘Well, not by their surnames alone; it doesn’t sound nice. They generally put a Mr. before them. But if you like,’ Blake went on with audacious ease, for he was far from shy before the poor Kabyle girl, ‘you may call me Vernon. That’s my Christian name; and that’s how Englishwomen always call a man they know well, and really care for.’

‘I really care for you, Vernon; I like you very much,’ Meriem said straightforwardly.

‘In that case, I, too, shall claim the same privilege of friendship, and ask you to call me plain Eustace,’ Le Marchant put in, with gentle solicitude.

‘Very well, Plain Eustace,’ Meriem answered, in her innocence taking the name in good faith as a single compound one.

The laughter that met this unintentional sally was so very contagious, that Meriem herself joined in it heartily, though it was some minutes before she could be made fully to understand the intricate mysteries of European nomenclature.

When she had left the tent that night, her errand finished, Le Marchant turned round to his easy-going travelling companion with much earnestness in his quiet eye.

‘Blake,’ he said seriously, ‘I hope you’re not trying to make that poor girl fall in love with you.’

‘I’m not doing anything to *make* her fall in love,’ Blake answered evasively; ‘but she’s never met anybody who treated her decently in her life before, and I suppose she can’t help perceiving the well, you know, the difference between you or me, for example, and these ignorant Kabyle fellows.’

‘Blake, you must surely see for yourself that in feeling and in intellect the girl’s more than half an Englishwoman. If you win her heart, and then go away and leave her without a word to this man you say her uncle sold her to, you’ll murder her as truly as if, like the Kabyles, you stuck a knife into her.’

Blake shuffled about uneasily on his campstool.

'She can't be such a fool as to think I should ever dream of marrying her,' he replied, with a half-averted face.

Le Marchant looked across at him with mild eyes of wonder.

'At any rate, Blake,' he said, in a very solemn, warning voice, 'don't engage her affections and then desert her. She may be a Kabyle in outward dress; but to do that would be as cruel a deed as ever you could do to one of those educated English ladies you think so much about. Of one blood—all the nations of the earth. Hearts are hearts the whole world over.'

Blake was silent, and threw back his head carelessly to inspect the sketch he was busily cooking.

CHAPTER IX.

STRIKING A CLUE.

It was a glorious hot day in an Algerian July. The mountains stood clear from cloud in every direction, with their peaks etched out distinctly against the gray background of the hazy-white sky; and Le Marchant made up his mind early in the morning to attempt the upper slopes of the Lalla Khadidja dome, one of the highest among the surging giants of the Djurjura, covered thick with snow for nine months of the year, but now just free at last, under the influence of a burning hot spell of sirocco, from the white cap it had worn since the beginning of winter. Blake, ever eager in the quest of the picturesque, was ready enough to join him in his mountaineering expedition; while Meriem, who had once or twice made her way on foot as a pilgrim to the tiny Mahommedan shrine of the Lady Khadidja, which lies nestled amid snowdrifts just below the summit, had after some hesitation agreed to accompany them, with two other of the village girls, as guide and interpreter. Nothing could have been nicer or more satisfactory—to the painter. Just at the last moment, however, as the party was on the very point of starting, that formidable Ahmed came lounging up, with his full-fed air of Oriental insolence, to interpose his

prospective veto. It made Blake's blood boil to see how the fellow treated that beautiful model. For some minutes he spoke in a hectoring voice with Meriem; and it was clear from the gestures and tones of the pair that Meriem for her part was by no means measured in the terms of her answers.

'What does the man say?' Blake asked at last, unable to restrain his disgust and anger.

'He says,' the girl answered, with a flushed face, 'he'll never let me go mountain-climbing with the infidels. But I don't care a pin. He's a bad man. He's jealous—jealous; that's what he means by it.'

'And what did you tell him?'

'I told him,' Meriem replied, with a little stamp of her shoeless foot on the bare rock, 'he might order me about when he'd bought me and paid for me; but at present I'm free, and my own mistress. I shall go where I choose—till I'm bought and paid for.'

As she spoke, the young Kabyle's hand played ominously on the hilt of the short steel knife that every mountaineer of the Algerian hills carries always in his girdle as a weapon of offence. For a straw, he would have drawn it and stabbed her to the heart.

Le Marchant observed the gesture with his quick eye, and suggested hastily:

'Ask him if he'll go himself instead, and guide us? We'll pay him well—give him two francs for conducting us to the summit.'

Your Kabyle never refuses money.

Ahmed assented with delight to the modified proposal, and his fingers ceased toying at once with the handle of his dagger. Le Marchant had done a double stroke of business—appeased his jealousy and gratified his innate love of gain—the two universal mainsprings of action in the poor and passionate Kabyle nature.

They started on their way, the three men alone; and Meriem gazed long and wistfully after them with a surging sense of unrest and disappointment. Something within her stirred her deeply—something she could never venture to confide to Mouni or to Yamina, her closest intimates. How handsome he looked, in his rough tourist suit, that delicate young painter with the speaking eyes, beside Ahmed, her

betrothed, in his dirty bernouse and his ragged undershirt ! How beautifully he talked, and how beautifully he painted, and what strangely divine things he knew how to say to her ! Echoes of some unknown world, those sweet fresh words of his ! She gazed and gazed, and tears filled her eyes. Her soul revolted with a shock against Ahmed.

Could she really be falling in love—with an infidel ?

And then a sudden terror began to seize her heart when they were well on their way, and past hope of overtaking. Should she run after them and warn them of the possible danger ? Lalla Khadidja is a steep and precipitous mountain, full of rearing crags and crevasses and gullies. Suppose Ahmed, whom she knew to be jealous of the two young Englishmen, were to push them over on some dangerous ledge, and pretend they had fallen by accident while climbing ! To a Kabyle such treatment of the infidel would seem positively meritorious. The idea turned her sick with alarm and anxiety. She could hardly hold the threads at the upright frame where she sat all day, in the Amine's hut, weaving a many-coloured native haik for herself, a mighty labour of the loom, to wear—when she was married to Ahmed. Married to Ahmed ! The thought of it sickened her. Till lately it had seemed so natural—and now ! She longed for the evening, and the travellers' return. Allah in His goodness protect the Englishmen !

But the two young men, meanwhile, all ignorant of her fears, toiled up the craggy slopes towards the bold summit of the great shadowy mountain. As soon as Meriem was fairly out of hearing, Blake turned round to his companion, and asked in a tone half angry, half disappointed :

'What on earth made you bring this fellow along with us at all ? We could have found our own way to the top very well without him.'

'Why, I was afraid to leave him behind with Meriem,' Le Marchant answered, with a quick glance at the sinister face of their scowling guide. 'In the fellow's present temper, with his blood up, it would take very little to make him stick a knife into her. I know these people ; they're quick, and they're revengeful. A word and a stab is the rule with the tribes, especially with women. They kill a

woman with far less compunction than you or I would show in treading on a scorpion.'

'He's a brute!' Blake answered, striking the rock with his stick, 'and I'm glad she hates him.'

For some hours they continued their toilsome march, ever up and up, with the wide view opening wider each step before them.

Towards the summit of the mountain, where the rocks were hardest, they came suddenly on a rearing crag of porphyry, as red as blood, and as hard as granite. It was a beautiful mass, and a beautiful prospect spread out in front of it. Le Marchant sat down at its base in the shade (for, high as they stood, the sun's rays still scorched fiercely), and refreshed himself with a pull at his pocket-flask of whisky and water. On its north side, a cave or rock-shelter ran far into its face. Something on the precipitous wall of the crag within this cave caught Blake's quick eyes as he glanced up at the ferns in the crannied rock with a painter's interest.

'Surely,' he cried, in immense surprise, pointing up with his stick, 'that's an inscription written or carved on the cliff in English letters!'

Le Marchant jumped up and looked at the object hard. It was indeed an inscription, covered thick with moss and lichen, which gather so rapidly in these southern climates, and overgrown by masses of maidenhair and ceterach; but, by scraping it with a knife, it soon became legible. The letters were firm, and boldly incised, and the legend ran thus, as Le Marchant read it out aloud, in Roman capitals:

‘CLARENCE KNYVETT,

SUA IPSIUS MANU FECIT:

ANNO HEGIRÆ

MCCLXIV.’

'What does it all mean?' Blake asked, somewhat timidly, for he hated to display his ignorance of the learned languages before his scientific companion, who seemed to know everything.

'It means,' Le Marchant answered, '“Clarence Knyvett wrote this with his own hand, in the year of the Hegira 1264.”'

‘What the dickens is the Hegira?’ Blake asked again.

‘The year of Mahommed’s flight to Medina,’ Le Marchant answered, with a politely-stifled smile at such ingenuous ignorance. ‘It stands in the East for A.D. with us. It’s the date from which the Mussulmans reckon their era.’

‘And how long ago was 1264 by this precious date?’ Blake asked once more, suspecting it, vaguely, to be somewhere about the days of the Crusaders.

‘I don’t know exactly—I’m not up in my calendar—but quite recently, I should be inclined to say. Somewhere within the last twenty years or so, at most. The Hegira, you know, was early in the seventh century.’

‘Then I’ll tell you what,’ Blake cried, with a start of surprise, ‘Meriem’s father must have written that up there!’

‘Great wits jump. The very same thought had just occurred to me at the very same moment.’

‘I’ll copy it in my sketch-book, exactly as it stands,’ Blake cried, sitting down again, and pulling out that faithful companion of his wanderings.

And in ten minutes he had produced on paper a rough facsimile of the inscription in its own letters, with an outline of the mass of rock on which it was cut, and the wall-flowers and stocks and maidenhair ferns that sprang out of the crannies in the crag all around it.

‘If Meriem’s father really wrote it,’ he said, as he shut up the book again, ‘it’ll be a pleasant souvenir to carry away with us of the girl; and, in any case, it’s interesting as the record of a previous European visit in such a spot. I thought we were the first who ever burst into that silent cave. Besides, it makes quite a pretty little picture.’

As he spoke, Ahmed signified, with a wave of his hand, that it was time for them to go if they wished to rise and descend again before sunset: and in a few minutes they were fairly at the summit.

It was with a beating heart that Meriem waited for them to come back again that evening, safe and sound, from the terrors of the treacherous mountain. She watched for them on the path some way out, whither she had gone to meet them, ostensibly for the purpose of driving the goats home to the milking, but really to relieve her own inner anxiety.

As she saw them, her bosom gave one great bound. Blake raised his hat with jaunty gallantry, and, opening his book, handed her over the sketch, on purpose to see if the name on the rock roused any latent chord in her uncertain memory. But she looked at it blankly.

‘It’s pretty,’ she said, ‘though not so pretty as most of your sketches’—for her stock of English was rapidly increasing under her new teachers. ‘I don’t see much in it—only a piece of rock and a few small scratches. Are those letters, I wonder? They look like letters; yet they’re not the same as one reads in the Koran.’

‘What! Can’t you read English?’ Blake cried in surprise.

It seemed strange to him that one who could speak so well, with the accent and manner of an educated lady, should be unable to spell out one word of our language.

‘No,’ Meriem answered with a shake of her head. ‘I can’t read it. Yusuf meant I should learn to read it in time; but we had no books, and he died so suddenly; and then, of course, it was all forgotten.’

‘Well,’ Le Marchant interposed, with a fresh test—for he, too, was anxious to try experiments—‘the first word—this one here on the face of the rock, you see—is Clarence.’

Meriem’s brow gathered suddenly. One moment her memory seemed to strike at last a long-forgotten track. Next instant she cried with a bright flash of recognition:

‘Yes, yes; that’s it! He wrote it! He wrote it! I remember now. I remember it well. My father’s English name was . . . Clarence Knyvett!’

‘Right!’ Le Marchant answered, with a gleam of triumph. ‘That’s just what’s written there: Clarence Knyvett, with his own hand, in the year 1264 of the Hegira.’

The girl seized the book rapturously in her hand, and kissed the picture three or four times over.

‘It’s his!’ she cried again, in an ecstasy of joy. ‘He wrote it! He wrote it! How good of you to bring it! It was Yusuf! Yusuf!’

He was the only soul on earth she had ever known—save one, perhaps—who fulfilled to the utmost the yearnings of her profound European emotional nature.

As the two men sat alone in their tent that night, while

Diego was engaged in pressing the Alpine flowers from Le Marchant's collecting-case, the artist looked up, and said to his friend suddenly:

'Wasn't Knyvett the name of that Girton girl, you remember, who was made Third Classic or something of the sort the other day at Cambridge?'

'Yes,' Le Marchant answered—'a Miss Iris Knyvett. She's a niece, I believe, of Sir Arthur, the rich old General. I thought of that myself, as soon as I saw it. The name's an uncommon one. It's a curious coincidence.'

'How queer it would be,' Blake went on reflectively, 'if this girl were to turn out a member of the same family!'

'It wouldn't at all surprise me,' his friend replied, with profounder meaning. 'Whoever her father was, he must at least have been an educated man. Her English, as far as it goes, you must surely have noticed, is the pure English of ladies and gentlemen.'

'But what a gulf between them!' Blake exclaimed, with emphasis. 'A girl who can't even read or write—and a Third Classic!'

'She can read the Koran,' Le Marchant answered quickly. 'One language is always the key of another. And, indeed, I think I can see in her something of the same earnest and vigorous qualities that imply, to one who looks below externals, the stuff for making many Third Classics.'

'My dear Le Marchant, you carry things too far! Upon my word, I really believe you're half in love with her!'

Le Marchant paused for a moment before replying.

'It's more to the point to remember,' he said at last, a little constrainedly, 'that she's very much better than half in love with *you*, Blake, and that you've got no right, thinking as you do, to encourage the feeling.'

Blake laughed gaily.

'Oh, it's all right,' he answered, in an unconcerned tone. 'In the autumn, you know, she's to marry Ahmed.'

To say the truth, the implied imputation of being a lady-killer, even in the case of a mere Kabyle peasant-girl, rather flattered his sensitive artist's soul than otherwise.

CHAPTER X.

RIVAL CLAIMS.

HAROLD KNYVETT, Esquire, of the Board of Trade, and late of Trinity College, Cambridge, lounged lazily back in a leather-covered arm-chair in the comfortable smoking-room of the Cheyne Row Club, Piccadilly.

'Well, yes, my dear fellow,' he remarked with a languid sigh to the sympathetic friend (last left in town) who stood complacently, cigarette in hand, with his back to the empty carved marble fireplace, 'I ought to come in for it, there's no doubt at all in the world about that; and I expect I shall too, for I've laid my plans deep, and I've played my cards warily. Sir Arthur's a difficult person to deal with, I admit—between you and me and the club clock, as selfish an old pig as ever walked this earth, and pig-headed to match, into the bargain. But allowing for all that—and I've allowed liberally—I've made things modestly certain in the end, I flatter myself; so that one way or the other I'm tolerably sure to turn up trumps, unless the cards miscarry.'

'That's well,' the sympathetic friend responded cheerfully. 'I believe the only other person who has any claim to the estate is your famous cousin, that unspeakable Girton girl, who licked all the men but two in the 'Varsity into a cocked hat—isn't she?'

'Exactly so. The only other person; and to make things doubly sure, I've kept my hand well in meanwhile with *her*, too; so that if the worst should ever come to the worst, I shall simply marry her, you see, and take the property that way—with an encumbrance, unfortunately. For I confess, being by nature a lover of freedom, I should prefer it for my own part wholly unburdened.'

'And suppose she won't have you?' his friend suggested, with a faint smile of doubt.

'Won't have me? My dear sir, at the present day any man on earth may have any girl he chooses if he only takes the trouble to set about the preliminaries properly. Women at present are a drug in the market. Girls without money you may have for the asking; girls with money, or with expectations of money, you may have by approaching them

in a proper spirit from the side of the emotions. *Il faut leur faire la cour, bien entendu*—and that, I admit, is a degrading mode of exercise—but when the money can be had on no other condition, the wise man will not disdain even that last unpleasant one. He will stoop to conquer; and then, having once secured what are popularly known as the girl's affections, he'll take care that the settlements, which form the kernel of the whole transaction, should not be drawn up too stringently in the lady's favour. Those are my sentiments on the matrimonial position.' And Harold Knyvett, having thus delivered himself of his social views, rose from his chair with the resolute manner of a man who knows his own mind to the bottom, and buried his hands deep in his trousers-pockets.

'However,' he went on, after a brief pause, during part of which he had been engaged in selecting a really good cigar with deliberate care from the box a club-servant had brought in to his order, 'I don't anticipate any such misfortune as that, I'm happy to say. I've very little doubt Sir Arthur, selfish pig though he is, will do the right thing in the end before he kicks the bucket. I rejoice to say he's a man with a conscience. You see, when he first came into the property, he made a will, a most disgusting will, which he left with his solicitors, and the contents of which are perfectly well known to me, through the kind intervention of Sir Arthur's valet—as a principle in life, always cultivate your rich uncle's valet; it can do you no harm, and may be of infinite use to you; a guinea or two bestowed in judicious tips, in that particular quarter, may be regarded in the light of a lucrative long investment.'

'A *quid pro quo*,' his friend suggested jocosely, emphasising the 'quid' with a facetious stress, after the manner of that most objectionable animal, the common punster.

Harold Knyvett winced, but he smiled for all that, or pretended to smile. Always smile when you see it's expected of you. As a man of taste, he detested puns, especially old ones; but native politeness, of which he possessed a large stock—the servile politeness of all mean natures—made him careful to laugh at them, however outrageous or however antiquated. 'Precisely so,' he made answer. 'A *quid pro quo*,' without the emphasis. 'Well, by this beastly will, he

gives and bequeaths his landed estate and his entire fortune, save and except his own paltry savings from his military pay, to my cousin, the root-grubber, the Greek root-grubber, on no better ground, if you please, than just because my grandfather the Admiral, out of the pure vindictiveness of his nasty temper, desired him, by implication, so to leave it. My grandfather, you know—a most unnatural person—had a grudge against my father, his own youngest son, and expressly excluded him, by the terms of his will, from all reversionary interest in the property.'

'Bad-blooded old gentleman!' the sympathetic listener piously ejaculated.

'Extremely,' Harold went on, with a smile that showed his even row of blue transparent teeth. 'A worse-blooded old gentleman, indeed, never lived, for, not only did he cut off my father with a shilling, an act which I could, perhaps, have endured with equanimity, but he cut me too out of all benefit of succession—me, a babe unborn (at the time I am speaking of), who had never done anything on earth, good or bad, to offend him. Such mean vindictiveness positively disgusts me. But the will was badly drawn up, it appears, and so the wicked old man, by his own mistake, made the grievous error of leaving Sir Arthur—alone, of all his sons—through an omitted phrase, the power of appointment. Now, Sir Arthur, at the time he came into the property, had seen practically nothing of either my cousin Iris, the root-grubber, or myself—been away in India half his life, you see, and knew neither *my* good points nor *her* weak ones. The consequence was, influenced by the bad old man's expressed wishes, he drew up a will at once—the ill-advised will I've already described to you—cutting me off with a few wretched thousands of personal estate, but leaving the bulk of the landed property absolutely to Iris.'

'And that will he means to stick to?' the sympathetic listener inquired politely.

'I hope not,' Harold Knyvett replied, with a glance at his ash. 'You see, the other side played their cards badly. This girl Iris has a meddling old busybody of an uncle: you know him by name—Whitmarsh, Q.C., the man who muddles all the famous probate cases. Well, this old fool of a man Whitmarsh, ignorant of the fact that Sir Arthur had made

such a will already, began to bully and badger my uncle in his vulgar fashion, by insinuating to him privately that he'd better not leave the property to me, or else he'd find a good case made out against him on the strength of the Admiral's express disapprobation. Naturally, that put Sir Arthur's back up. Nobody, and especially not a peppery old General who's served more than half his life in India, likes to have it dictated to him by rank outsiders what disposition he's to make of his own money. I was wiser than that. I didn't try bullying; I tried soft sawder. I approached Sir Arthur, as I approach the young woman, from the side of the affections. Then Iris herself, again, instead of assiduously captivating the old gentleman, as any girl with a grain of common-sense would, of course, have tried to do, positively neglected him for something she calls the higher culture, and, immersed in her Hellenic agricultural operations, dug roots exclusively, when she might rather have been sedulously watering and nursing her relations with Sir Arthur.'

'Thought more of her "Odyssey" than of her uncle, I suppose. That was lucky for you, Knyvett; for, by Jove! she's a pretty girl, you know, and agreeable into the bargain. If she'd chosen to make up to him, I expect your chances would have been shaky.'

'You say the truth, my dear boy. It *was* lucky for me. I admit it frankly. But I, who always play my cards carefully, have taken great pains to eliminate luck. I've visited the old gentleman every blessed year with recurrent regularity at his summer quarters, at Aix-les-Bains, much to my own personal discomfort, for he's a selfish old epicure, and I hate selfishness; but the end, of course, justifies the means; and I think I've made it pretty safe by this time that he either has drawn up, or is about to draw up, a new and more sensible will in my favour. As a matter of conscience, he's sure to see to it. I shall snap my fingers then at the man Whitmarsh. And, indeed, it'd be a pity, when one comes to think of it, that a Quixotic, impulsive girl like Iris should have the sole management of all that splendid property. She's like all learned ladies; she's quite unpractical. I met her last week at a garden-party at Staines (where I was very attentive to her, of course, just to keep my hand in); and what do you think the girl actually told

me? She's going to train as a hospital nurse. Her uncle, old Whitmarsh—who, though a meddling old fool, is a man of the world, one can't deny—did his best to dissuade her from it; but she wouldn't be dissuaded. She wanted to do some good in her generation! Utopian, quite! It'd never do for her to come into the property!

'If I were you,' the sympathetic friend responded suggestively, 'I'd make haste all the same to assure myself as a fact that Sir Arthur had really altered the will. Testamentary dispositions are ticklish things. Men put them off so, from day to day, especially at his time of life, you know. He might die any morning, out of pure mischief, and leave you in the lurch and your cousin in clover.'

'That contingency, unfortunately,' Harold replied, with a sigh, 'it's impossible for the wisest of men to guard against. But I've hedged, even so; I've made my book cautiously. It occurred to me to pay marked attention beforehand to my cousin Iris, who's a pretty girl, after all, and not insensible, I fancy, in spite of her Aristotle, to a man's advances; and I mean to get up an informal engagement with her, of a non-committing character; so that if by accident she should come into the money (which heaven forbid), I can annex the property that way, girl and all included; and if, on the other hand, all goes well, I can shuffle out of it quietly by letting the thing die a natural death, and come into the estate wholly unencumbered.'

'That's neat and cute of you,' his hearer responded, a little dubiously; 'but perhaps a trifle too sharp for most men's fancy.'

Harold Knyvett's reply was suddenly cut short by the entry of a boy in buttons with a telegram. 'For you, sir,' he said, handing him the flimsy pink paper on a tray. Harold took it and tore open the envelope carelessly. An invitation for a day on the moors, no doubt; or an urgent request from the editor of the *Piccadilly Review* for a hasty notice of that forthcoming work of Kekewich's on the 'Slavonic Element in the Balkan Peninsula.'

As he read it, his face turned white with mingled disappointment, rage, and impotence.

'What's up?' his friend asked, scenting failure on the breeze.

‘Why, this,’ Harold answered, as he handed him the trumpery little crumpled scrap of Government economy. ‘From my uncle’s valet. The fruit of my investment.’

The friend read it mechanically aloud :

‘Sir Arthur died at two this afternoon, at his residence at Aix, quite suddenly, of *angina pectoris*. I have searched his papers up and down, but can find no trace of any other will than the one now in the hands of his solicitors.

‘Your obedient servant,

‘GILBERT MONTGOMERY.’

A crushing blow ! The cards had failed him !

It was a minute or two before Harold Knyvett recovered his usual presence of mind after that deadly reverse. Dead, and with no other will yet made ! Dead, with no chance of influencing his decision ! Dead, before he had even proposed to Iris ! To ask her now would be too open and unblushing a confession of fortune-hunting. Procrastination had lost him both chances at once—his uncle’s procrastination in the one case, his own in the other. If only he had proposed a week since at that garden-party at Staines ! Fool, fool that he was to let the opportunity slip idly by him !

It was only for a moment, however. Next minute, strategy had resumed the command. Vain regret was very little in Harold Knyvett’s line. Like a strong man, he nerved himself after his defeat, and proceeded to bring up his reserves for action. He looked at his watch. The hand was on the very nick of five. News of Sir Arthur’s death wouldn’t get into even the last edition of this evening’s papers. Iris would therefore not probably hear of it till to-morrow morning. No more procrastination ; no more delay. The last moment for the forlorn hope had now arrived. If he took his pretty cousin by storm to-night, all might yet be well, and the estate might be secured, even though burdened with the undesirable encumbrance.

Harold Knyvett was not a marrying man ; but if the worst came to the worst, he reflected with a sigh, a man might marry a plainer girl than his cousin Iris.

He had an engagement with his superior in the office at

seven, to dine at his club, worse luck, and he dared not neglect it. Cautious before all things, Harold Knyvett would never throw away the substance for the shadow. The office was a certainty; Iris was a chance. No gambler he; he would stick to his engagement. But he could go away early, thank heaven—say at 9.30, or thereabouts (pleading an At Home)—and be up at his aunt's before the clock struck ten. Filled with the scheme, he rushed to the door and hailed in all haste a passing hansom. It took him to his chambers in less than ten minutes. There he sat down at his old oak desk and wrote at full speed two hurried letters. The first was to the heiress: 'A most judicious step,' he said to himself, with a chuckle.

'MY DEAR IRIS,

'I am very particularly anxious to see you this evening about ten o'clock on a matter of some serious importance to both of us alike. You are always kindness itself to me, I know. May I ask you, if possible, as the best and sweetest of cousins, not to go out at all to-night, or, in case you have any engagement for the evening, to come home again early, so that I may manage to have ten minutes' talk with you alone? I know you'll do this for me, like a dear good girl. With much love, in breathless haste,

'Your very affectionate cousin,

'HAROLD.'

The second was a hasty note to his solicitor:

'DEAR HARDY,

'The old man has popped off the hooks this afternoon at Aix, and, as far as I can make out, has neglected to draw up any other will than the one I told you of. This is beastly. We must resist all probate of the existing document to the utmost of our power. I'll see you upon the subject to-morrow morning. Meanwhile, look over my grandfather's will—you have a copy, I believe—and take all necessary steps immediately, to prevent a surprise by the other party.

'Yours, in hot haste,

'HAROLD KNYVETT,'

Then, being nothing if not a methodical man, Mr. Harold Knyvett proceeded to put both letters, out of pure force of habit, to copy in his copying press—the solicitor's first, and Iris's afterwards. A copy is always a handy thing; you can produce it when necessary, and suppress it when inconvenient. That done, he rang the bell for his servant.

'Send those at once to their addresses by a commissionaire,' he said abruptly. 'Let him take a cab. At Miss Knyvett's I should like him to wait for an answer.'

CHAPTER XI.

GOOD NEWS FROM AIX.

ABOUT the same time, that identical afternoon, Uncle Tom arrived by hansom, very red-faced, at Mrs. Knyvett's house in West Kensington. Great trepidation possessed his soul, and an open telegram fluttered ostentatiously in his left hand. 'Calm yourself, my dear,' he remarked, with sundry puffs and blows, to Iris, who, indeed, had only just come in from tennis, and seemed to the outward eye of a mere casual observer as calm as any Third Classic ought always to be; 'don't be too agitated, there's nothing to alarm you. I've brought you news—most important news. Your uncle, Sir Arthur, died at Aix-le-Bains at two this afternoon, of *angina pectoris*.'

'Well, really, Uncle Tom,' Iris answered, with a smile, throwing her pretty little arms caressingly around him. 'I suppose, of course, I ought to be awfully sorry; he's papa's brother, and all that sort of thing; but, as a matter of fact, I hardly remember seeing him when I was quite a baby, and having always regarded him only as one of the family portraits, I don't feel as if I could screw up even a conventional tear now to lament his demise with.'

'Sorry!' Uncle Tom exclaimed, in a fervour of astonishment. 'Why, you ought to be delighted! overjoyed! irrepressible! Sorry at coming into six thousand a year, indeed! Why, the girl's gone cracked! I'll trouble you for her calmness! Sorry, indeed! Sorry!'

At the words, Mrs. Knyvett, who was standing by, fell back in her chair, with her main aquiline feature pointed

straight towards the rose in the centre of the ceiling, and indulged parenthetically in a loud fit of mingled hysterical sobs and laughter. If Iris was insensible to her own good fortune, Mrs. Knyvett, at least, as an irreproachable British mother, felt bound to rise vicariously on her account to the height of the situation. But as soon as this little interruption had been partially composed, according to due precedent, by the application of sal volatile and eau de Cologne, Uncle Tom was enabled to proceed more systematically with his exposition of the existing crisis.

'Now calm yourself, my dear,' the fat little old gentleman began again, with much energy, being, in fact, very far from calm himself, and therefore, like many other people in the same circumstances, particularly anxious to quiet the nerves of other people. 'Here's the telegram I've just received from Savoy:

"Sir Arthur died at two this afternoon, at his residence at Aix, quite suddenly, of *angina pectoris*. I have searched his papers up and down, but can find no trace of any other will than the one now in the hands of his solicitor.

"Your obedient servant,

"GILBERT MONTGOMERY."

It was word for word the self-same telegram that Harold Knyvett had received at the Cheyne Row Club; but of that little peculiarity in its duplicate form Uncle Tom, of course, was as yet unaware.

'He's a treasure, that valet,' he murmured to himself, with a hug of delight. 'Behaved most admirably. Never expended ten pounds in my life to better advantage!'

'But why does he telegraph to you, uncle dear?' Iris asked, much puzzled.

'Well, the fact is, my child,' the old barrister answered, with a somewhat shamefaced look, for he felt he must confess the one sin of an otherwise blameless life openly, 'in any other case I wouldn't have descended to obtaining information from any other man's servants, by fair means or foul; but in dealing with a scoundrel of the calibre and metal of Harold Knyvett——'

'Uncle!' Iris cried, firing up, 'you've no right to pre-

judge him ! You've no right to speak so of any of my relations ! You've no right to call my cousin a scoundrel.'

'Exactly so, my dear,' the old man went on, in a pleased tone. 'I like you none the worse for withstanding me to my face, as Paul did somebody, and sticking up for your relative, though he does happen to be a sneak and a cur and a bully ; but, at any rate, in dealing with a claim like his (if that phrase will satisfy you), I thought it best to ensure beforehand prior and exclusive information of my own from your uncle's body-servant ; so that the moment Sir Arthur was comfortably dead, and past the possibility of meddling with his last will and testament, we might secure ourselves at once against Harold's machinations. That fellow'd stick at nothing, I can tell you, my child. He's a bad lot. Why, he'd forge a will, I know, if he saw no other way of getting what he wanted, as soon as look at you.'

'Uncle !' Iris exclaimed again severely ; and the old gentleman immediately assumed a penitent attitude.

'Well, he's dead, anyhow,' Uncle Tom went on, with professional glee ; 'and it's pretty sure now he's made no will but the one we know about. So, Iris, the position amounts to this : you're the mistress of six thousand a year—a great fortune, my dear ! A very great fortune !'

'I hope I may be able to spend it wisely for the good of the world,' Iris answered, with a sigh.

She was a trifle pale, but otherwise seemed about as calm as usual. Her calmness irritated Mrs. Knyvett inexpressibly.

'For goodness' sake, Iris !' she exclaimed, getting up as though she'd like to shake her, 'do laugh, or cry, or scream, or do something just to show you understand the importance of your position. I never in my life knew such a girl as you are. When that Cambridge local or something was going to be announced the other day, you were as white as death and as agitated as—as a jelly ; and now that you've come into six thousand a year you're as calm over your good fortune as if six thousand a year were a kind of accident that dropped in upon one daily !'

'But the examination was so much more important to *me*,' Iris answered gently, stroking her mother's hair, to prevent another sudden outburst of sobbing and laughing. 'I did

that myself, you see, by my own exertions; whereas this is a sort of adventitious external circumstance. It's not what one *has*, so much as what one *is*, that matters. Besides, the question's really this: oughtn't Harold to have at least as much as I have?

'God bless my soul! why?' Uncle Tom exclaimed, in extreme astonishment.

'Because, you know, we were both equally related to Sir Arthur by birth; and I should have felt it an injustice myself if Sir Arthur had left everything he had to Harold, and nothing to me. It would be a manifest inequality; and, as Aristotle says, in the "*Nicomachean Ethics*," equality is justice.'

'But the law, my child!' Uncle Tom exclaimed aghast—'the law of the land—the law allows it. "Perfect freedom of testamentary disposition," Blackstone remarks, "is the keystone of the English law of bequest and inheritance."'

'It may be the law,' Iris made answer unabashed; 'but is it right? is it justice?'

Uncle Tom's hair stood on end with alarm at the heretical question. A lawyer who had spent the best part of his life in pleading probate cases to be set such a problem!

'They're the same thing, my dear,' he made answer, gasping—'the self-same thing under two different aspects. The law defines and expresses clearly what is right and proper for a man to do in each particular instance; it lays down the strict principles of individual justice.'

'Herbert Spencer thinks,' the Third Classic went on, undismayed by his evident outburst of horror, 'that law is merely the brute expression of the will of a real or practical majority—generally a dead majority: often an ignorant and prejudiced mediæval majority. He holds, in fact, that law in its essence——'

'Heaven bless the girl!' Uncle Tom exclaimed, stopping both his ears with his hands vigorously. 'If she isn't going to lecture me on Political Economy! Why, haven't I already explained to you, miss, that you may do anything on earth with me, except two things—bandage my legs, and give me lectures on Political Economy? I desire to live and die a humble Christian, in complete ignorance of that

hard-hearted science. Let's return to our muttons. Let me see, where were we ?

'I was saying,' Iris went on, in her quiet firm way, 'that I thought I ought to share this fortune with Harold, who seems to me to have quite equal claims to it with myself, uncle.'

Uncle Tom's wrath seethed up rapidly to boiling-point. 'With Harold !' he cried out in an agony of disgust. 'With that sneak ! with that cur ! with that incarnation of selfishness ! Upon my soul, my dear, if you were to do such a quixotic thing as that, as long as I lived I should never speak another word to you.'

'I should be very sorry for that,' Iris answered with a smile—'at least, if I believed it ; more sorry than for anything else I could think of on earth ; for I love you dearly ; but if I thought it right, whether you meant it or not, I should have to do it.'

'Iris !' her mother exclaimed, with a severe curve of the principal feature, 'how on earth can you talk in such a way to your uncle—and after his unremitting kindness to you always !'

'We must first of all obey our consciences, mother,' Iris replied gravely. '*Fiat justitia*, you know, *ruat cælum*.'

What end this discussion of first principles might have reached between disputants so utterly without common premisses it would be hard to say, had not a diversion been suddenly effected by the entrance of the maid with a note for Miss Knyvett. 'And the messenger's waiting in anansom for the answer, miss.'

Iris read it through with some slight misgiving.

'From Harold,' she said shortly, and handed it to her uncle.

The barrister drew a long breath as he glanced at it angrily.

'Too affectionate by half !' he cried. '"The best and sweetest of cousins !"' "In breathless haste !" He's hedging, now. He's got wind of this, too, and he's going to propose to you. The scamp ! the skunk ! the disgusting vermin !'

Iris was too charitable to believe it true without maturer evidence.

‘We must wait and see,’ she said; ‘I don’t want to prejudge him.’

‘It’s true,’ Uncle Tom went on, with rising indignation; ‘I see through the cur. There’s been double-dealing here. That scoundrel of a valet has taken pay from both of us alike, and sent us both an identical telegram. Harold knows he’s cut off without appeal, and he wants to propose to you before you get the news and know what he’s driving at.’

‘I hope not,’ Iris cried, flushing up with shame at the mere suggestion.

Uncle Tom was turning over the letter curiously.

‘Why, God bless my soul!’ he exclaimed with a start, ‘what’s this upon the fly-leaf? What extraordinary marks! They look for all the world like the reverse of a letter.’ And he sat down to examine them with the close and patient scrutiny of an old hand in the Probate and Divorce Division.

CHAPTER XII.

REJECTED!

At ten o’clock, as Iris fingered the piano in the drawing-room alone (by special arrangement), a rat-tat at the door, loud but decorous, announced her cousin Harold’s arrival. Iris’s heart beat quickly for a minute; it was an ordeal to have to see him on such an errand alone, but she had made her mind up to learn the whole truth, cost what it might, and she would go through with it now to the bitter end at all hazards. A frail little thing on the bodily side, she was by no means wanting in moral courage; and here was an opportunity, a hateful opportunity, all ready to hand for testing her self-confidence.

As for Harold, he came up in evening dress and in excellent spirits; after all, it was only a temporary check; he would marry the fortune, if he couldn’t inherit it. Any man nowadays can select his girl, and make tolerably sure of her, with a little attention! It’s only a matter of casting your fly well. He wore a cream-coloured rose, with a maidenhair, in his button-hole; his shirt-front was faultless.

and his white tie of the most immaculate neatness. Women attach some importance to these trifles, you know, even though they happen to be Third Classics; and Harold Knyvett was well aware that his teeth were pearly, and his eyes cold blue, and his moustache the envy of the entire Civil Service. He entered with a look intended to be almost rapturous.

‘How good of you, Iris!’ he cried, as he kissed her, though his cousin shrank away somewhat timidly from that doubtful kiss. ‘I see you understood me! That was ever so nice of you. And alone, too! That is more than I could have asked! What rare good fortune! I hardly expected to find you alone here.’

‘Mamma had a headache,’ Iris answered with truth, for the shock and the hysteria had proved too much for the possessor of the aristocratic feature; ‘so she went to bed early. What did you want to see me about, Harold? Has anything unusual turned up since I saw you?’

‘Nothing unusual, dearest,’ Harold went on, leaning forward, and looking profoundly in the direction of her averted eyes; ‘but a feeling I have long felt growing within me has come to a head at last; and this afternoon it broke over me suddenly, like a flash of inspiration, that I could no longer put off opening my whole heart to you.’

Iris’s hand trembled violently. She hated herself, she was so horribly guilty; it was such a wicked duplicity to let him go on—she, who knew all the facts already. Yet she would play out the comedy to its natural close, come what might of it, for the sake of certainty. Harold noted her agitation, and misread its meaning.

‘I’ve nobbled her,’ he thought to himself, with a triumphant smile. ‘See how her hand trembles! But I’ll play her gracefully a little longer. It’s unsportsmanlike to gaff your fish too hastily.’

So he went on once more, in a soft, low tone, taking her hand, half unresisted, in his own, and playing with it tenderly, while Iris still kept her face studiously averted.

‘Iris, one thing that made me think more particularly of this to-day is my strong desire there should be no shadow of mercenary feeling on either side between you and me, whose interests should be so identical in all things. Uncle Arthur’s

still alive. While he lives, neither of us knows to which of the two, or in what proportion, the dear old gentleman will leave his money. Now, I felt it borne in upon me with a sudden impulse this afternoon that it would be better if, before either of us was thus put in a position of superiority, so to speak, in worldly goods over the other, we were to let our hearts' secret out mutually. And for that I've come to see you to-night. . Iris, I love you—I've always loved you, of course; but of late I've learnt what my love meant. Dare I hope, darling?' and he raised her hand tentatively, but with ardour, towards his thin lips, and was about to print upon it what seemed to him the appropriate warm kiss of a devoted lover.

Iris, however, could stand the strain of this false position no longer. Withdrawing her hand suddenly from his with a violent start, she took slowly from her pocket a note in his hand, and began to read some pencilled words, interspersed with ink, on the fly-leaf of the letter. She spoke them out with a trembling voice, but with great clearness, to this unexpected purport:

‘DEAR HARDY,

‘The old man has popped off the hooks this afternoon at Aix, and, as far as I can make out——’

She had got no further when Harold, red as fire, with a sudden dart forward, tried to seize the compromising document from her hand; but Iris was too quick for him, and too relentless as well. She dashed the letter with one hand behind her back, then advancing to the gas, and facing him full, she held it up before him, and read to the very last line his note to his solicitor. She would let him see she understood to the full the whole depth and breadth of his unmanly baseness.

Harold Knyvett, well-bred sneak as he was, stood and listened shamefaced, now white as a curd. What could all this mean? What error had he committed? He knew he hadn't blundered the elementary blunder of putting the wrong letter by mistake into Iris's envelope. His good business habits and his clockwork accuracy sufficed to save him from such a puerile scholar's mate from a woman as that; for he always subscribed each letter to its recipient at

the bottom of the page with antique punctiliousness, and always took care to look, as he folded them, that subscription and superscription tallied exactly. All the more, therefore, was he nonplussed to understand how Iris had got hold of his note to Hardy. Could the fellow have betrayed him? Impossible! Impossible! But he stood there, with his face all livid to behold, and his eyes fixed hard upon the pattern of the carpet, till Iris had completed to the very last word her righteous torture.

‘What does this mean, Iris?’ he asked angrily, as she folded it up with a smile, and replaced it in the envelope.

‘It means,’ Iris answered, handing him over the note, now she had quite finished it, with ironical courtesy, ‘that you use too thick and too black a copying ink. I advise you in future, Harold, to employ some thinner kind if you wish to prevent a recurrence of this unfortunate exposure.’

She was white as a sheet herself, but righteous indignation bore her through. The man should know he was detected and unmasked; he should writhe for his meanness, whatever it cost her.

Harold took the note from her hand and gazed at it mechanically. He saw now at a glance the source of all these woes. The flyleaf of Iris’s letter, laid downward in the copying-book, had taken a faint and half-illegible impression of his note to Hardy from the wet page opposite. In any other hands than Thomas Kynnersley Whitmarsh’s, those loose, sprawling daubs on the blank sheet would no doubt have meant rather less than nothing. But the distinguished Q.C. and great authority on probate cases had seen too many strange documents and forgeries in his time not to have become an adept in handwriting and all that appertained to it. No expert was sharper on a stroke or a dot than he; the crossing of a ‘t’ was enough to convict a man of sin before his scrutinizing spectacles. By holding up the page to the light of the gas, he had been able to supply with dexterous pencil-strokes the missing portions of each word or letter, and to reconstruct, entire, the compromising epistle to Mr. Harold’s solicitor. So skilfully had he built it all up, indeed, that even Iris herself could no longer doubt her cousin’s meanness, nor could Harold, when confronted with his own handiwork, thus unexpectedly re-

produced, venture to deny or explain away to her face his authorship of the letter.

The baffled schemer looked at Iris with cynical coldness. He had played his cards altogether too well.

'Then it's all up,' he said—for he knew when he was beaten; 'it's all up, I suppose, between us?'

'Yes, it's all up,' Iris answered coldly; 'and so far as I am concerned, Harold Knyvett, I do not any further desire the honour of your acquaintance. I tried to believe in you as long as I could, though I never liked you, and I never cared for you; I can believe in you no longer, and I wish to see no more of you.'

Harold looked across at her with a curl on his lip.

'Your new-come fortune has made you proud in a hurry,' he sneered out angrily. 'But don't be too sure about it yet, my lady. Remember, Sir Arthur's title had a flaw in it from the first. What he bequeathed to you was, perhaps, from the very beginning, not his to bequeath you.'

'I'm not concerned at present about Sir Arthur's title,' Iris answered, cold as ice, and trembling violently, but still self-possessed; 'I'm concerned only about your own shameful and cynical duplicity.'

'Ah, that's all very well for you to say just now,' Harold went on, taunting her, 'while you're angry at a slight to your personal pretensions; but you won't think so by-and-by, you know, when you come to look into it. There *is* a flaw, and, whether you like it or not, you've got to face it. Sir Arthur knew it, and you'd better know it, too, if you're really and truly Sir Arthur's inheritor. The old gentleman came into the property himself on the strength of affidavits to the effect that his second brother, Clarence, had predeceased his eldest brother Alexander, having been killed in action in crushing a native insurrection in Algeria, in or about the year 1868, if I remember rightly. The Courts would have accepted the affidavits, perhaps, if the claim had been opposed, and perhaps they wouldn't. But as no opposition was raised, administration was granted, and Sir Arthur was allowed to succeed quietly. However, there was a flaw in the evidence, for all that. And I'll tell you the flaw, to let you see how little I'm afraid of you. Clarence Knyvett's body was never recovered, or never identified.

He was only missing, not certainly killed. And as he had run away from England to avoid serious unpleasantness in the matter of a criminal charge preferred against him by his own father, and as he was serving in the French army, under an assumed name, to avoid detection, the question of identification was by no means an easy one. Sir Arthur went over to Algiers to settle it, to be sure, and satisfied himself (as, indeed, he had every reason to be easily satisfied) that Clarence Knyvett had died, in fact, at the date assigned. But many soldiers of his old regiment did not believe it. They thought he'd sneaked off, and hidden among the natives. And if Clarence Knyvett's now alive, he's the owner of the property; and if he's dead, dying at a later date than Alexander, his children, if any, and not *you*, are the inheritors of his estate!

As he spoke, Iris faced him with cold contempt in every line of her face.

'Is that all you have to tell me?' she asked severely, as soon as he had finished.

'No,' Harold answered, losing his head with rage, 'that's not all. I've something more to tell you. You won't like to hear it, but I'll tell you, for all that. One bad turn deserves another. Unless a later will of Sir Arthur's turns up, leaving the property in a more equitable manner—as it may do any day—I shall never rest satisfied till I've hunted up Clarence Knyvett, his heirs and representatives, and turned you out of the doubtful inheritance to which you've probably no real title. So now you know what you've got to reckon with.'

'And if another will *does* turn up,' Iris rejoined quietly, though with ashy lips, 'leaving the property entirely to you, you'll accept Sir Arthur's claims without hesitation, and let Uncle Clarence's heirs, if he ever had any, go without the inheritance to which they have probably the best title! . . . Is that what you mean? Harold, you may go!' And, rising to her full height, she pointed to the door. 'You had only one friend in your own family,' she said, 'and you've succeeded to-night in turning her against you.'

Harold took up his hat, and went. On the landing he paused.

'Remember,' he called back, with a parting shot, 'I'll

not rest till I've brought the rightful heirs to light against you.'

Then he walked down the stairs, and emerged, all on fire, into the gaslit streets of fog-bound Kensington.

As soon as he felt the fresh air on his brow, however, he recognised with a rush how serious a mistake he had committed in his anger. Another will *might* turn up any day—a sensible will in his own favour—and then they would have this handle of the flaw in the title to use against him. Or if another will did *not* turn up—well, it was absurd to think that a man of education and technical skill like himself—a man of resource and energy and wit—a man, above all, possessed of the precious and invaluable quality of unscrupulousness—should let himself be diddled out of a splendid estate by a pack of women, for no better reason than just because a piece of dirty paper with a few names scratched upon it was not duly forthcoming from Sir Arthur's davenport. It's easy enough, of course, to copy a signature: any fool can do that. Sir Arthur *ought* to have altered that will; he *meant* to alter it; he all but *did* alter it. How perfectly simple to—well, to alter it posthumously for the dilatory old man, in accordance with his own obvious and expressed intentions!

Forgery, they call it, in the coarse, blunt dialect of the Probate and Divorce Division.

But in that case, as things stood, he had put a weapon into Iris's hands which she might possibly be inclined to use against him. Well, now that the matter had gone so far wrong, the best way in the end would perhaps be to let them prove the existing will, which would commit them to acceptance of Sir Arthur's claim; and after that, whenever the—the new hypothetical will turned up (and it *should* turn up; on that he was decided), they would find it less easy to fight the matter against him. Meanwhile, to annoy them, he'd hunt up his uncle Clarence's business, too. The man very likely was still alive. Any weapon's good enough to use against an enemy.

An enemy! And yet, what a splendid creature that girl was, after all! He had never admired her so much in his life before as when she confronted him like a wild-cat in her anger to-night. That righteous indignation became her

magnificently. By Jove, she was grand! What a fool he'd been not to marry her long ago! Why, let alone the fortune, she was a girl any man might be proud to marry for her own sake any day—if he meant marrying. She was so pretty, so clever, and had such funds of character! And he'd noticed the other afternoon, as they drove back from Staines in a friend's open carriage, she was the only woman that ever lived who held her parasol of deliberate purpose at such an angle as not entirely to shut out the view of all surrounding objects from her male companion.

A splendid creature, and a most undoubted heiress. But, as a woman alone, well worth the sacrifice.

He wished to goodness, now, indeed, he'd married her off-hand a couple of years since. Nay, more, in his own cold, selfish way, he awoke with a start to the solemn fact that he wanted that woman. As far as was possible to such a nature as his, he was in love with Iris—and he had only just that very evening discovered it.

CHAPTER XIII.

IRIS STRIKES.

'UNCLE,' Iris said, when she talked it over with the old barrister in the dining-room next morning, 'after all that happened last night, do you know, I'm not perhaps quite so anxious as I was to share Uncle Arthur's fortune with Harold.'

'God bless the girl!' Uncle Tom cried, in mock horror. 'What on earth does she mean now? You were both equally related to Sir Arthur by birth, weren't you? and, as Aristotle says, equality is justice.'

Iris blushed slightly. It was too cruel of him thus to bring up her own words in judgment against her.

'But he behaved so disgracefully, so abominably, last night,' she said apologetically. 'He doesn't deserve it.'

'It's a great comfort to me to see,' Uncle Tom responded, with a cheerful blink, 'that going to Girton and coming out Third Classic still leaves a girl essentially a woman at heart for all that. No woman that ever lived, whether she'd read

Aristotle or not, cares or ever cared one farthing yet about abstract justice. What women care about is the satisfaction of their own personal emotions and feelings. I'm glad to see, my dear, that in this respect you're no better than the rest. "He ought by rights to have half this property, of course," you say in effect; "but as I see he's a sneak and a mean-spirited cur, I don't think I'll bother about giving him his fair share of it." Very womanly and very right. That, I take it, my child, is about the long and the short of your argument.'

Iris laughed.

'Perhaps so,' she replied. 'But anyhow, Uncle Tom, after what he did and said last night, I find my desire to do him strict justice has considerably abated.'

So, Aristotle to the contrary notwithstanding, Uncle Tom was permitted vicariously to prove Sir Arthur's will in due course—Iris herself being named sole executrix—and to take all necessary steps for her succession to the landed property. As soon as all the legal arrangements were finally completed, Iris once more had a great consultation to make with her guardian, guide, philosopher, and friend. She had given up the hospital nurse fad, of course, for the present, as inconsistent with her existing position as a great heiress; but she had another mine to explode upon poor Uncle Tom now, and once more a mine due to an acute attack of that most undesirable and inconvenient mental disease, conscience.

'Now I want to know, Uncle Tom,' the heiress and Third Classic said persuasively, cornering him at bay in an easy-chair in Mrs. Knyvett's little drawing-room at Kensington (for they had not yet taken possession of the projected mansion in Lowndes Square), 'is there any truth, or is there not, in that story of Harold's about Uncle Clarence's supposed disappearance?'

The distinguished Q.C. shuffled awkwardly in his seat. For the first time in his life he began faintly to realize the feelings of an unwilling witness under his own searching cross-examination.

'A cock-and-bull story!' he said at last evasively. 'Just said to frighten you. If I were you, Iris, I'd think no more about it.'

'But *is* there **any** truth in it, uncle?' Iris persisted, with quiet emphasis, as the distinguished Q.C. himself would have done in the same case, if only he had got his own double safely lodged in front of him in that amateur witness-box.

'Bless my soul!' Uncle Tom replied, stroking her hair gently to create a diversion, 'what a persistent cross-examiner the girl is, to be sure! If I tell you no, you'll not believe me, and if I tell you yes, you'll want to go running over Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, not to speak of the islands of the Pacific Ocean, in search of Clarence Knyvett, his heirs, or executors.'

'Then there *is* some truth in it,' Iris went on, with one hand laid persuasively on her uncle's arm.

'As much truth as a man like your cousin Harold can speak, I suppose,' the old man answered, with a gasp, as who should at last resolve to have an aching tooth drawn, for he felt sure she must get it all out of him now. 'The fact is, my dear, your uncle Clarence's death, like Jeames De la Pluche's birth, is "wrop in mystery." He left England under a cloud. He was a gay young soldier, always getting into scrapes, and always spending more than he'd got, and skulking in disgrace, and compounding with his creditors. It's supposed, though I don't know anything about it for certain, that he forged, or tried to forge, your grandfather's name to sundry acceptances. It's further supposed that this came at last to your grandfather's knowledge, and that your grandfather, being, like Moses, an austere man, threatened to expose the whole business. So Clarence, it is believed, like the great Orion, went sloping slowly to the West. Anyhow, one fine morning the news got wind that your uncle was missing; and from that day to this he has been consistently missed, and never turned up again.'

'But what was that about his enlisting in the French army?' Iris asked, with a caress, as the old man paused.

'Well, nothing was known about that, my dear, during your uncle Alexander's life,' Uncle Tom went on, like a man from whom evidence is extorted by rack and thumb-screw; 'we thought, indeed, he'd gone to America. But as soon as Sir Arthur inherited the property, it became necessary to find proof of Clarence's death, whether Clarence was dead

or living; so Sir Arthur, tracking him gradually from France, went over to Algiers in the end to find it. It was through that, in fact, that he settled down first at Sidi Aia. Well, this was the result of Sir Arthur's investigation.' And here Uncle Tom refreshed his memory by a pull at his note-book. 'He found that Clarence, on leaving England, had enlisted in the Third Chasseurs at Toulon, under the assumed name of—what was it? let me see. Ah, yes! Joseph Leboutillier; that he had been sent over to Algeria to join his regiment; that he took part for some time in operations in the interior; and that during the partial insurrection of 1868 he was employed in a column sent to reduce the mountaineers of some outlandish place they call Grande Kabylie. A certain battle took place in this remote quarter against the insurgents on the 20th of June in that year, and after it, Mr. Joseph Leboutillier was reported missing. His name was struck off the roll of the regiment, and though his body happened to be never identified, the French authorities were perfectly convinced that he died in the skirmish, and was lost on the field—an accident which, as Beau Brummel said about a rent, may happen to any gentleman any day. Our own Courts admitted the papers Sir Arthur produced as proof of death, and were satisfied of the identity of Joseph Leboutillier with Clarence Knyvett. In short, the question's really as good as settled; a judge *in camera* has decided *pro forma* that Clarence Knyvett died on the 20th of June, 1868; so die he did, then, legally and officially, and there's nothing more to be said about it.'

Iris smiled.

'I wish, uncle dear,' she said good-humouredly, 'I could share your supreme faith in the absolute wisdom and abstract justice of the law of England. But John Stuart Mill says— Oh dear me! I forgot'—for Uncle Tom was stopping up his ears already, lest they should be profaned by fresh assaults of that dangerous and detestable political economy. 'To return to the question now before the House: what did Harold mean? or did he mean anything, by saying that many soldiers of Uncle Clarence's regiment didn't believe he was really dead, but thought he'd sneaked off and hidden himself somewhere among the natives?'

Uncle Tom started.

'God bless my soul!' he exclaimed, with a gesture of horror. 'So this is what comes, then, of sending girls to Cambridge. Who says women have no legal instincts? Why, the girl ought to have gone to the Old Bailey Bar! With the acumen of a judge—if judges have any, which I very much doubt—she puts her finger plump down at once on the one weak point of the entire contention. Remarkable; remarkable! Well, the fact's this: an ancient French military in retreat—that's just how he signed himself—anonymous, practically—once wrote a letter to Sir Arthur at Sidi Aïa (shortly after your uncle Alexander's decease), telling him he didn't believe this man Leboutillier was dead at all; but that he'd run away, and gone off absurdly on his own account to join the natives. The ancient French military in retreat didn't give his name, of course, so we couldn't cross-examine him; but your uncle sent me a copy of the letter from Aix-les-Bains, and also another to your cousin Harold. The ancient French soldier, in this precious communication, declared he had been a *chasseur* with Mr. Joseph Leboutillier, and had known him well; that Joseph Leboutillier was an eccentric person, holding exaggerated notions about justice to the *indigènes*; that he specially objected to this particular war, waged against some people called Kabyles, if I recollect aright, who inhabit the trackless mountains of the interior; that he often expressed the deepest regret at being employed to crush out the liberty and independence of "these unfortunate people;" and that he almost refused on one occasion to obey his superior officer, when that gentleman ordered him to join in burning down the huts and villages of the insurgent tribesmen.'

'Very like a Knyvett,' Iris murmured parenthetically.

'Very. The Knyvetts were always quixotic,' Uncle Tom continued, with a faintly-compassionate inflection of his forensic voice. 'But, at any rate, the ancient French military in retreat was firmly convinced that Joseph Leboutillier had deserted in the battle, to avoid bearing arms against the Kabyles any longer; and he said that many other ancient militaries of the same regiment entirely agreed with him in this supposition.'

‘And then?’

‘Why, then Sir Arthur sent up a French detective, who understood Arabic, into the mountains to make full inquiries, just to satisfy his conscience; for though he was a selfish, pig-headed old man, Sir Arthur, and as cross as two sticks, he, too, had a conscience, like all the Knyvetts—bar that singular exception, your uncle Charles, with his son Harold. Your father and you, to be sure, inherited the family conscience in its most virulent form; but it was strongly-enough developed even in poor old Sir Arthur. That’s why he left his fortune to you, my dear, instead of to Harold; he thought it was his duty, and duty to a Knyvett’s a perfect will-o’-the wisp, leading you all into every Utopian quagmire you happen to come across—though, in this case, of course, he was perfectly right in obeying its dictates.’

‘And what did Sir Arthur find out at last?’ Iris asked gently, stroking her uncle’s hand with her own, as if to deprecate his wrath at her possession of anything so inconvenient as a sense of right towards others.

‘Most fortunately, my child, he found out exactly nothing. The natives fought shy of his detective to a man, and energetically disclaimed knowledge of any sort about Joseph Leboutillier. They’d never even heard the name, they swore. So Sir Arthur came back empty-handed from his quest, and enjoyed his property in peace and quietness. Quite right, too. People ought never to pay any attention at all to anonymous letters. Particularly not in matters affecting the Probate and Divorce Division.’

Iris was silent for a minute or two more. Then she said slowly, much terrified lest she should rouse the dormant lion of Uncle Tom’s wrath:

‘Sir Arthur may have been satisfied with that, Uncle Tom, but I’m not. I suppose, as you say, I’ve got the family conscience in an aggravated form; but, whatever it says, I must obey it. I must find out exactly what became of Uncle Clarence.’

The distinguished Q.C. flared up like petroleum.

‘You’re a fool if you do, my dear,’ he answered, losing his temper.

‘“But, children, you should never let your angry passions rise,”’ Iris quoted gently. ‘That shows you think there’s

still some chance Uncle Clarence is really alive, or has children living. In Jevons's "Inductive Logic," I remember'—but Uncle Tom's ears, stopped tight with either thumb, turned once more as deaf as the adder's. He listened not to Iris's Girtonian charms, charmed she never so learnedly, that stony-hearted barrister.

'I might be using somebody else's money, you see,' his niece went on quietly, as soon as Uncle Tom gave signs of having recovered the free use of his auditory nerve, 'and that, you must admit, would be sheer robbery.'

Uncle Tom had too much respect for the law of England not to allow, with obvious regret, the justice of that last patent truism.

'Well, what do you propose to do?' he responded sulkily.

'For the present, advertise in the English, French, and Algerian papers,' Iris answered, with calm persistence, 'for any information as to the whereabouts or death of Clarence Knyvett or Joseph Leboutillier.'

'And raise up for yourself a score or so of imitation Tichborne Claimants,' Uncle Tom cried, with concentrated scorn in his voice.

'What is a Tichborne Claimant?' Iris asked, in all innocence, imagining the animal to be some peculiar species of legal technicality—a *nolle prosequi*, for example, or an *oyer and terminer*. The shadowy forms of John Doe and Richard Roe floated lambent on the air before her vague mental vision.

'Bless the child!' Uncle Tom exclaimed fervently, raising his hands to heaven. 'What happy innocence! What golden ignorance! You may thank your stars you don't even know the creature by name. Why, when I was young, my dear, some twenty years ago or so, we all of us wasted three good twelvemonths of our lives with feverish anxiety in following the fortunes and final exposure of a wretched impostor, a claimant to the Tichborne estates in Hampshire, who was inflicted upon a long-suffering world solely as the result of injudicious advertising in colonial papers by an ill-advised woman. And you're young enough and lucky enough never even to have heard of him! If you weren't, he'd have taught you a severe lesson. Well, so much for the present, you say—so far, bad; and how about the future?'

‘In the second place,’ Iris went on firmly, ‘as soon as ever the weather’s cool enough to allow it, I’ll go over to Algeria, and hunt up all I can find out about Uncle Clarence on the spot, in person.’

‘Well, that’s not so bad,’ the eminent Q.C. responded, mollified, ‘for it’ll enable you, at any rate, to take possession yourself of the house and belongings at Sidi Aia.’

CHAPTER XIV.

FOLLOWING UP THE CLUE.

It was evening, and Le Marchant lay outside the tent, in the shade of the old gnarled olive-tree that overhung the tomb, taking his lessons in Kabyle on an outstretched rug from his pretty teacher, Meriem. He had made considerable progress in the language by this time, having a natural taste for picking up strange tongues, as often happens with people of bilingual origin, and Le Marchant, as a Jersey man, had been born bilingual, if the expression may pass muster in this age of heredities. The painter, like Pliable, had turned back disheartened at that first Slough of Despond, the irregular verbs, and given up the vain attempt in despair; he sat idly by now, drawing lazy sketches in his pocket-book of Meriem in her didactic attitude, with her forefinger uplifted, and her pupil before her. Hard by, two young Kabyles, just returned from their fields, stood gossiping opposite them, with hoes in their hands. One was Ahmed, Meriem’s future purchaser; the other was a taller and better-robed young man of more unpleasing aspect, whom they had often seen before hanging about the village.

Suddenly, as Meriem was in the very act of saying, ‘Now, Eustace, remember, *asfifi*—a dress,’ and Le Marchant was obediently repeating the word after her in due form, one of the young men, for no apparent reason, raised his voice loudly, and, rushing forward with a yell, flew like a dog in blind rage and wrath at the throat of the other. Before they could clearly see what was happening, the second flung him off, but with some little difficulty. In a moment, the tussle had assumed a savage form; they were fighting tooth and

nail in one confused mass, and Ahmed's knife, drawn like lightning from its scabbard, gleamed bright in the air, just ready to descend on the bare breast of his taller antagonist. With a sharp cry Meriem and Le Marchant sprang forward together with one accord, and separated the two combatants by main force, after a short, sharp struggle. The whole thing was over in a second or two at most, and the two angry men stood glaring at one another across five yards of distance, like bull-dogs whose masters hold them apart forcibly by the collar. A few angry words, a few hasty explanations, a deprecating speech from poor trembling Meriem, whose face was scarlet with shame or excitement, and forthwith Ahmed's knife was quietly sheathed once more, and the men, smiling now with all their even white teeth in perfect good-humour, embraced like brothers, as if nothing at all had happened between them. That is the way with these simple children of Nature. One moment they'll stick a knife into you without the slightest compunction; the next, for no reason a European can fathom, they'll give up their very hearts to please you.

'What was it all about?' Blake asked, with interest, as Meriem returned, flushed and panting, to the rug.

'It was about *me*, Vernon,' Meriem answered, unabashed, with perfect simplicity. 'This is how it happened. Ahmed wanted to marry me, you know, and had bargained with my uncle, and got a price named for me; but now, the other man, Hussein, has offered my uncle a little more, and so the Amine has made a new arrangement, and I'm to be sold to Hussein, who's offered the best price, and is so much the richer.'

She said it as she would have said the day was fine. It was matter of course to her that she should be thus passively and unresistingly disposed of.

'Do you like him?' Blake asked. 'Or, at least, do you dislike him any less than Ahmed?'

Meriem raised her stately head with proud unconcern.

'What does it matter to me?' she answered haughtily. 'I like none of them either better or worse than another. They're only Kabyles.'

'You don't care for Kabyles, then?' Blake went on, with culpable carelessness.

‘Not since I’ve seen Englishmen,’ Meriem replied, with the same perfectly pellucid sincerity as ever.

It was to her a simple statement of mental experience. She had no idea of flirting, in the English sense. Her feelings were so. She must marry, naturally, whoever purchased her.

When she was gone away that evening, and they sat alone in the tent, Le Marchant turned round after a long pause, and said earnestly to Blake, ‘It comes home to me more and more every day I stop here that we ought to hunt up something about this poor girl’s English relations.’

‘Why so?’ the painter asked. ‘You think she oughtn’t to be allowed to marry Ahmed or Hussein?’

‘Certainly not. It’s terrible to me even to contemplate such a thing as possible. She must never marry anybody but a European, her natural equal.’

‘Then why don’t you marry her yourself, my dear fellow? You seem to be awfully gone on her, always.’

Le Marchant hesitated. ‘Because,’ he said, at last, in a very serious tone, ‘she wouldn’t take me.’

‘Not take you! Just you ask her! What an absurd idea! Why, my dear fellow, she’d take Ahmed or Hussein, or any other man her uncle chose for her. Not take you, indeed! Not take an Englishman! Why, she’d just jump at you.’

‘I think not,’ Le Marchant answered, much more earnestly. ‘She might take Ahmed or Hussein, as you say, no doubt, because she couldn’t help herself; but not me—of that I’m certain.’

‘And why not, Le Marchant?’

‘Because, my dear fellow, if you ask me the plain truth, her heart’s already otherwise engaged—and to a man who doesn’t really care twopence about her.’

There was a long pause; then Blake remarked again, withdrawing his cigarette in a pensive way, ‘Do you really mean to tell me, Le Marchant, you’d marry that girl—that barbarian—that savage, if you thought she’d take you?’

‘It’s a terrible thing to think of her being made over, bound hand and foot, to Ahmed or Hussein, the naturalist

answered evasively. 'They'd treat her no better than they treat their donkeys.'

'And to prevent that, you'd throw yourself away upon her, a mere Kabyle girl! You with all your cleverness and knowledge and education! A man like you, the heir of all the ages, in the foremost files of time—why, the thing's ridiculous! Le Marchant, I haven't half your brains or your learning, I know; I'm nothing but a landscape painter, the least among the wielders of camel's hair, but sooner than tie myself for life to such a creature as that, I'd blow my brains out, such as they are, and be done with it for ever. To toy with, to flirt with, to amuse one for a day—very well, if you will; but to marry—impossible. Never, never, never!'

'Tastes differ,' Le Marchant answered drily; 'especially in these matters. Some people insist upon accomplishments and high-heeled boots; others care rather for marked character and native energy. You may judge men largely by what they admire. Strong natures like strong natures; and, given strength, they despise externals. Other minds think more of mere culture, perhaps; it's not the diamond they admire, but its cutting. Diamonds in the rough are to them mere pebbles. For my part, it's the stone itself that takes my fancy. You don't care for her; I don't ask you to care for her; but don't break her heart any more than's absolutely necessary. For I see she can't help falling in love with you.'

Next morning, when Meriem came round to the tent, as was her daily wont, with the milk from the cows she tended herself for the two young Englishmen, Le Marchant met her with a sadder and more anxious face than usual. 'Meriem,' he said, 'I want to speak to you seriously about your own future. Whatever comes, you must never marry either Ahmed or Hussein.'

'Does Vernon say not?' Meriem asked, all fluttering.

'No,' Le Marchant answered, crushing down her poor heart at once of deliberate purpose, for he knew no possible good would come to her of that painful illusion. 'I say so myself, because I take a friendly interest—a very friendly interest—in your life and happiness. Meriem, I want to

look up your English friends. If I found them out, would you care to go and live in England ?

‘Not alone,’ Meriem answered, with a promptitude which clearly showed she had already asked herself that leading question. ‘When Yusuf used to take me on his knee, and tell me about England long ago, I always thought I should like to go there, if only he could go with me. And since I’ve seen you and Vernon, Eustace, and heard all about it, I’ve often fancied I should like to go there if only I had anyone to take care of me and take me there. But it’s so far across the sea, and the people over yonder are all infidels—not that I’m quite so afraid of infidels now, either, since I’ve seen so much more of you and Vernon.’

‘Why wouldn’t your father take you there, Meriem ?’

Meriem opened her large brown eyes very wide with astonishment.

‘They would have put him in prison, of course,’ she said, with decision. ‘It was for fear of that that he ran away and became a Kabyle. None of the infidels seemed to like him. The French would have shot him, and the English would have imprisoned him. I think there must have been feuds between the tribes in England, and that his tribe must have been angry with him, and cast him off, for he told me his family would have nothing to say to him. But I like the English very much for those three things : that Yusuf was English, and that the English were kinder to my father than the French, and that—that you and Vernon are Englishmen, Eustace.’

Le Marchant looked at her with profound pity. He couldn’t bear to think this strong and guileless nature should be cast away as a beast of burden for some wretched Kabyle like Ahmed or Hussein.

‘Is there nobody, Meriem,’ he said at last, ‘who can tell me anything more about your father ?’

Meriem reflected for a moment in silence. Then she answered somewhat doubtfully : ‘If anybody could tell you, it’s the Père Baba.’

‘And who’s the Père Baba ?’ Le Marchant went on eagerly.

‘He’s a priest, a Christian, a missionary they call him, down at St. Cloud, in the valley there. St. Cloud, you know,

is where the colonists are. It's a wicked place, all full of Frenchmen. Yusuf would never go down to the village, for fear the people who live there should learn his French name, and then they'd have shot him. But the Père Baba and the Père Paternoster used sometimes to come up to see Yusuf, and my father was fond of the Père Paternoster, and told him many things. Our people were angry at this often, and used to say to him: "Yusuf, you're a Christian still at heart, and you confess to the priest and say prayers with him;" but Yusuf always answered: "No, not so bad as that; I only see the Père Paternoster as a friend, and on matters of business." And once, before the Père Paternoster was dead, my father fastened this charm round my neck, and told me the Père Paternoster had given it to him, and to be very careful that I never lost it.'

'What's in it? May I see?' Le Marchant went on, laying hold of it eagerly. But Meriem drew back and started almost as if she'd been shot.

'Oh no,' she cried; 'not that, not that! Anything but that! Why, I wouldn't let even Vernon open it.'

'And what makes you like Vernon so much better than me?' Le Marchant asked, half hurt by her innocent frankness.

Meriem made no attempt to parry the charge. 'Who knows?' she answered, with both graceful arms and hands spread open before her. 'Who can tell what makes one's heart go so? Who can give any reason for all these things?'

He paints, and he talks, and he's beautiful, and I like him.

I like you, too, Eustace; oh, ever so much; I never liked anybody else so much before, except Yusuf; but I like Vernon differently; quite, quite differently. . . You know how I mean. You must have felt in yourself. . .

But I can't stop now. I must go on with my milk. The other people in the village will be waiting for their *cous-cous*. Don't be angry, like the Kabyles, because I like Vernon best. This evening again we shall learn Kabyle together.'

CHAPTER XV.

AN OASIS OF CIVILIZATION.

‘VERNON,’ Le Marchant called out with a sudden resolve, ‘I’m off to St. Cloud. I’ve a reason for going to-day. Will you come along with me?’

‘All right, Eustace, if you’ll just wait till I’ve finished washing out my sky,’ the painter answered briskly. They had picked up the trick of calling one another by their Christian names from Meriem’s example, and it had now grown with them almost habitual.

Hitherto, the two new-comers had intentionally avoided the dissipations of St. Cloud, not being anxious to study life in its peculiar outlying Algerian development, among the remote corners where a few ardent pioneers of civilization diffuse the blessings of European culture over a benighted land by congregating together to drink bad absinthe under the eye of the sun before the bare mud platform of a fourth-rate *estaminet*. But now that the chance of finding out something definite about Meriem’s parentage drew Le Marchant on, he was ready to face even the wooden houses and malodorous streets of the dirty new village in search of trustworthy news as to their strange acquaintance.

It was a long weary tramp, over hill and dale, among wooded ravines, and across rocky ledges; but before twelve o’clock the two young men had reached the military track from Fort National to St. Cloud, and found themselves at once, to their great surprise, in a fine and splendidly-engineered French highway. They had scarcely struck upon it, however, when, to their still greater astonishment and no little amusement, they came full face upon a mincing little Frenchwoman, attired after the very latest Paris fashion, in a frivolous frock, a jaunty jacket, and a volatile hat of wondrous architecture. She was thirty-five and skittish, with high-heeled boots and an attenuated waist, utterly unadapted to the practical necessities of a bare and dusty Algerian highroad. On either side of her, with clanking spurs, paced a military gentleman of youthful years but portly dimensions; while madame, in the midst, with her graceful parasol held coquettishly, now on this side, now

on that, chatted affably to both in intermittent gurgles with alternate flows of most Parisian liveliness.

'*C'est Madame l'Administratrice,*' the dirty-robed Kabyle, who had come with them to show them the way, murmured softly in their ears, with a low bend of his body, as the lady approached them. He had lived at St. Cloud, and knew some words of French. Le Marchant and Blake raised their hats as the lady passed, after the French fashion in country places, and would have gone on without stopping, half abashed at their dusty and way-worn condition, had not madame brought them to with a lively broadside across their bows, so to speak, of '*Bonjour, messieurs.*'

'*Bonjour, madame,*' Le Marchant answered, saluting again, and still anxious to pass on; but still the lady stopped him.

'You are the English artists, messieurs, of whom our *indigènes* told us, who have pitched a camp on the hills of the Beni-Merzoug, *n'est-ce pas?*' she asked condescendingly.

'My friend is a painter,' Le Marchant answered with a wave of his hand towards his blushing companion; 'I myself am a naturalist; and we are certainly camping out—but with one tent only, madame—at the Beni-Merzoug village.'

The lady pouted, or, rather, which is quite another thing, *elle faisait la moue*, an accomplishment as indescribable as unknown in English. 'Can you be unaware, messieurs,' she said with a smile of mingled reproach and gentle forgiveness, 'that it is the custom in the colony for all newcomers in the *arrondissement* of St. Cloud to pay their respects the first to M. l'Administrateur and to myself at the Fort? We have long been expecting you to do us the honour of making us a formal visit. *D'ailleurs*, we are not so well off for *agréments* in these trackless wilds'—she gazed straight ahead along the bare and well-made French road before her with a vacant air—'that we can afford to lose the agreeable society of an English painter and an English *savant*.' She looked up and smiled. 'I adore art, and I reverence science—at a distance.'

'Not trackless, quite, madame, however wild,' one of her escort murmured with gentle reproof, looking in front, in his turn, at the magnificent gradients of the sloping road, with

paternal pride. He was an officer of the *Génie*, and he felt his department unduly depreciated by madame's reflection.

'Forgive us,' madame,' Le Marchant answered, somewhat abashed by this open attack upon his character for politeness. 'We are strangers in the land, and to say the truth, we scarcely expected at St. Cloud the charm of female society. Besides, you do us far too much honour. We are simple students, each in his own art, and we have scarcely brought with us in our rough-and-ready camp the necessary costume for appearing in fitting dress at European functions. We could hardly venture to present ourselves thus before you.'

As for Blake, all awe-struck at the high-heeled boots and the Parisian hat, he left the conversation entirely in the competent hands of the naturalist. His French, such as it was, forsook him forthwith. Indeed, the commonplaces of the Ollendorffian dialect would here have stood him in very poor stead. He felt he could not insult so grand a lady as Madame l'Administratrice by addressing to her casual and fortuitous remarks about *la femme du jardinier* or *le fils du menuisier*.

Madame bowed a condescending little bow.

'In consideration of your contrition,' she said, 'and your implied promise of future amendment, monsieur, absolution is granted you. You see my generosity. You were coming to visit us, of course? Well, then, M. le Lieutenant,' to the elder of her companions, 'we will turn round and accompany these gentlemen back to the Fort.'

Le Marchant hesitated. He didn't wish to be rude, but it went against the grain of his honest nature to pretend a call was meant where none had been intended. A happy thought struck him, by way of a compromise.

'Not in this *tenue*, madame,' he said. 'Even in Algeria, we must respect the *convenances*; we couldn't think of calling upon any lady in such a costume. *En effet*, we were going to visit the Père Baba.'

The lady sighed.

'Hélas,' she answered, 'this is not Paris. We are glad to get callers in any *tenue*. But you will at least permit us to accompany you on your way as far as the village?'

'Thank you, madame. You are very good. This is a charming situation. So wild, so picturesque——'

'And so wholly unendurable!'

'But surely, madame, the scenery is lovely. It's a beautiful country.'

'Beautiful! *Je vous l'accorde mais vu de loin*. For a painter, possibly; but for a woman, *mon Dieu!* it's too far from Paris.'

'Still,' Blake ventured to remark, inspired to a sudden Ollendorffian outburst in defence of the scenery, 'there are many worse places than this in the world.'

'Perhaps so,' the little woman replied, with a crushing smile, 'but *faute de pire*, I'm quite satisfied in that way with this one.'

Blake retired in disorder from the unequal contest. Even had he possessed the rudiments of her language, the little Frenchwoman was clearly too much for him at the game of repartee. But Le Marchant, a bolder spirit, tried once more.

'You have lived here long, madame?' he asked, with his perfect accent.

'Long enough almost to have forgotten the boulevards. Fifteen years, monsieur; figure that to yourself; *et je regrette encore la cuisine Parisienne*.' She spoke with pathos.

'That is indeed constancy!' Le Marchant replied, with appropriate emotion.

'Monsieur,' the lady retorted, with a little mock curtsy and an ironical smile, 'it is *your* sex, remember, that has the monopoly of fickleness.'

They walked on towards the village, along the dusty road, all five abreast, Madame l'Administratrice chatting away gaily all the time in the same flighty strain about the discomforts of her situation, the distance from a really good milliner, the difficulty of getting endurable coffee, and, above all, the vices and shortcomings of *ces cochons d'indigènes*. Upon this last pet subject—a colonial substitute for the great servant question—madame, after the wont of Algerian ladies, waxed very warm, and nodded the volatile little hat most impressively, till the stability of its feathers was almost compromised.

'Believe me, monsieur,' she said at last, with much energy, stamping her neat small foot on the dusty *trottoir*,

‘we shall never have peace and security in Algeria till the French soldiers join hands across the country in a long line, and, walking over hill and dale together, sweep the *indigènes* before them into the Mediterranean.’

‘*C'est vrai*,’ the officer of the *Génie* assented with a profoundly convinced nod.

‘Strong measures, indeed,’ Le Marchant answered, laughing.

‘It is thus, monsieur, that France must fulfil her civilizing mission,’ the lady repeated stoutly. ‘Join hands in line, and march across the country, and sweep every Arab into the Mediterranean. *Le bon Dieu* never made the world, you may be sure, for those pigs of Arabs.’

‘But the Kabyles?’ Blake asked, with another gasping effort.

‘Do I distinguish between them, monsieur?’ madame answered scornfully, turning upon him with a suddenness that fairly frightened the painter. ‘Every *cochon d'indigène* is an Arab for me. I make no fine discriminations between Arab and Arab. *Un indigène c'est un indigène. Que voulez-vous, monsieur?*’

At the entrance of the little colony, madame paused and pointed.

‘Down that road, messieurs,’ she said, with her bland, small smile, ‘in the large house to the left, you will find the Père Baba. *Du reste*, I am charmed to have made your acquaintance so happily. It is pleasant to hear our beautiful language so well spoken. We shall meet again. *Au revoir, messieurs*. I receive, recollect, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. You can no longer plead ignorance. We shall expect to see you at my next reception.’

And with a coquettish inclination of the volatile hat, and a curious side wriggle of the frivolous frock, the spoiled child of the boulevards, accompanied by her military bowing escort, disappeared down the one long white street of the timber-built village.

Le Marchant and Blake, left alone by themselves, looked at one another in silence, and smiled a broad smile at this unexpected apparition among the wilds of Africa.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WHITE FATHERS.

‘You are Père Baba, monsieur?’ Le Marchant asked, with some misgiving in his tone, of the white-frocked old gentleman in a plain Arab bernouse who opened the door of the mission to receive them.

‘My name in religion is Brother Geronimo, my son,’ the old priest answered, with a courteous bow; ‘but the *indigènes* among whom I labour—to little avail, I fear, for the Propagation of the Faith is slow in Africa—know me better as the Père Baba. Will you step inside and refresh yourselves awhile? We are glad to receive you.’

In the bare white *salon*, with its little bright-coloured religious chromo-lithographs, into which he ushered them, Le Marchant briefly explained to the good Father the object of their visit, and asked with many apologies for such information as the priest could give him with regard to a person who seemed to be equally well known either as Yusuf, a Kabyle, or as Joseph Leboutillier.

The gray-bearded Father sighed and tapped his forehead. ‘Ah, *le nommé Yusuf*,’ he said, with a compassionate face. ‘Yes, yes, I knew him; I knew him, of course, *ce pauvre misérable d’Yusuf*. But you come too late; my brother Antoine was the man to have asked—him whom the *indigènes* called the Père Paternoster. Unhappily, Brother Antoine died last year, and much of what Yusuf had told him died with him, being given, of course, under the seal of religion. For Yusuf, though he lived among the Kabyles as a Kabyle, and bowed the knee, *pour ainsi dire*, in the temple of Rimmon, to save his life, remained at heart a Christian to the end, and confided many things to my poor brother, the Père Paternoster. He had a good heart, our brother Antoine, and he was kind to Yusuf, and went often to see him in his lonely hut on the mountains of the Beni-Merzoug.’

‘But tell us at least as much as you know, *mon père*,’ Le Marchant insisted, ‘whatever was not said to you or your brother under the seal of religion.’

‘You come as friends?’ the Father asked suspiciously, ‘or for some ulterior object?’

Le Marchant explained in a very few words, with transparent frankness, that they came in the interest of Yusuf’s daughter. They knew she had English blood in her veins, and they wished, if possible, to restore her to her relations, and to the bosom of Christendom.

That last touch told with Père Baba visibly. ‘It’s a sad story, *mon fils*,’ he went on, closing his eyes, and turning his face towards the bare white ceiling, as he stroked the beard which all missionary priests are permitted to wear in virtue of their calling; ‘a sad story, and I’m afraid I hardly know enough about it to tell you accurately anything that will be of serious use to this girl Meriem. She calls herself Meriem, I believe; ah yes, I thought so. I recollect the circumstances. Well, Yusuf’s story, so far as I can recall what Père Antoine told me, was something like this. He was an Englishman by birth, though I forget his name—let us agree that your guttural English names are impossible to remember. He came of a family, a very good family; but he was spendthrift and foolish, though never, I believe, wicked—*jamais, jamais coupable*. He told me so, and I always believed him. *Eh bien*, according to his own account, which you must remember is the only one I have heard, his younger brother, sharing his embarrassments, forged their father’s name to certain acceptances, which *ce pauvre* Yusuf, in a weak moment, not knowing their nature, agreed to get cashed for him. Yusuf declared to his dying day he had never the slightest idea that they were forged, and that his brother deceived him. For that, I know nothing; but, *monsieur*’—and the old priest’s voice had a womanly note of compassion as he spoke—‘I verily believe he was truthful, this unhappy exile.’

‘To judge by his daughter, I believe he must have been,’ Le Marchant interposed, with perfect sincerity.

The Father nodded.

‘Well, the fraud came to light,’ he continued, ‘and the brother shuffled out of it; he was *un mauvais sujet*, this brother, Yusuf always assured us. The evidence all pointed to Yusuf alone; the law was in search of him; Yusuf lost courage, and fled the country. He took passage to America

as a mere blind, but, as a matter of fact, he fled to France, under an assumed name, and never again dared to communicate with his relations.'

'He might have done so at least before he died,' Le Marchant cried warmly. 'The danger would then have been all past. For his daughter's sake, he ought surely, on his dying bed, to have written.'

'Monsieur,' the Father answered, with his eyes still closed, recalling slowly the half-forgotten facts, 'he never lay upon his dying bed at all. Had he died thus, these things might all have turned out differently. But *le bon Dieu* willed it otherwise. You shall hear in due time; for this was what happened. *Ce pauvre* Yusuf enlisted in the Third Chasseurs at Toulon, and was sent across here, under the assumed name of Joseph Leboutillier, to put down the insurrection among the M'zabites and the Kabyles. But as soon as he saw the sort of warfare in which he was to be engaged, his heart smote him; for he was a just man, Yusuf, though he had many failings; and let us admit, monsieur, that we other French have not always made war very honourably or very justifiably against these poor *indigènes*.'

'I fear as much from their disposition towards you,' Le Marchant said shortly.

'Well, when Yusuf came up to Grande Kabylie, *en effet*, he found his work was to be nothing less than exterminating the natives and expropriating their territory. That was what Yusuf, with his high ideas, could never endure. He hated to be made an instrument of what seemed to him tyranny. So, in a skirmish one day with the Beni-Yenni people, he found himself, by chance, alone behind a cactus hedge, with the body of a dead Kabyle in the ditch beside him. This he told Brother Antoine,' the old man said, looking round with a dubious air, 'and I don't know whether I ought to repeat it, for I am not sure that he didn't tell it under the seal of religion.'

'Continue,' Le Marchant said, with evident earnestness. 'It is for no bad purpose that we ask you to confide in us. What you say only interests me more profoundly than ever in this poor girl, Meriem.'

'So he took the dead Kabyle's bernouse, the priest went

on, seizing his hearer's arm for further emphasis, 'and stole away slowly, all unperceived, into the Kabyle camp as an honest deserter. He made signs to the *indigènes* that he had come as a friend. One of them, a former Spahis, who had served in France, and understood our language, interpreted for him; and the Kabyles, glad to avail themselves of his superior skill and military knowledge, received him with open arms and made him as one of them. It was thus he came to find himself proscribed by two nations at once—by the English as a forger, and by the French as a deserter.'

'It's a touching story!' Le Marchant exclaimed, with emotion.

Touching, indeed, for the poor man himself,' the Father went on, 'for, hunted down and terrified for his life as he was, Yusuf dared not return to civilization on any side; he had no money even to go to Italy or America, where, perhaps, he might have been free; and, a gentleman born and bred as he was, he became as a Kabyle, earning his bread by gathering olives or cutting corn with his own hands, and seeing no Christian face anywhere save my own and the Père Paternoster's, who alone had the keeping of his terrible secrets. The Amine of the Beni-Merzoug gave him his sister Halima, this Meriem's mother, as a Kabyle wife; and that one girl was their only child.'

'They were married?' Le Marchant asked.

'After the Kabyle fashion, yes. So far as I know, there was no other rite. But Yusuf lived with her faithfully as a husband, and loved her truly—in this, as in all things, accepting to the full his altered situation. He was a lovable soul, and in spite of everything, one couldn't help loving him; there was a silent heroism about the man's endurance that extorted at last one's highest admiration.'

'And what became of him at last?' Le Marchant asked, as the Father paused.

'He died suddenly,' Père Baba answered, 'without being able to give Père Paternoster his dying directions, or perhaps I might be able to tell you something more about his family in England. His death was brought about by most unhappy circumstances. A few years since, a French detective came up into the mountains, and began to make inquiries about

Joseph Leboutillier. The Kabyles heard of it, and warned Yusuf; they felt sure the authorities had somehow learned a deserter in open war on active service was skulking among their mountains, and had determined to make a stern example of him. So poor Yusuf fled to a cave on the Djurjura.'

'Just below the summit of Lalla Khadidja?' Le Marchant asked eagerly.

The Father nodded.

'You know it, then?' he said. 'Yes, it was there, the place. He remained in that cave in hiding for more than a week, while the French detective, an inquisitive fellow, went everywhere about, peering and prying, and asking for news of him, under the pretence that he wanted it for a friendly purpose. But the Kabyles were too cunning to be taken in like that; they denied having ever heard of any such deserter. So in the end the detective went back again to Algiers empty-handed, and poor Yusuf, who had been supplied with food meanwhile by the Kabyles, ventured to come down again one dark night to visit his dead wife's village.'

'And then?' Le Marchant inquired.

'Why, then, the weather being very stormy, and the rocks wet, the poor fellow, weak with exposure, slipped and fell on a precipice of the Djurjura, and was taken up stonedead by his friends, and buried in the cemetery on the side of the mountain. So that was how he never came to give final directions about his daughter to anybody; and as Père Paternoster knew all these particulars under the seal of religion, he could not divulge them or claim the girl for a Christian, as he would have wished to do; so she has been brought up ever since by the Amine, her uncle.'

The simple story touched Le Marchant profoundly. There was something so pathetic in this roughly-drawn picture of that double outcast flying from the offended laws of two great countries, one after the other, and taking refuge at last in a miserable rock-shelter on the summit of a wild and snow-clad mountain, that his imagination was deeply stirred by the plaintive incidents. He tried to find out more from the old priest by questioning; but he soon discovered that the substance of his tale had all been told,

and that the Father had little more than comment and conjecture to add to this, his first hasty summary. Père Paternoster could have told more, he was sure; but Père Paternoster was dead and buried, and nobody else knew much, if anything, about the whole matter.

They would have risen to leave when the interview was finished, but the Father, with old-fashioned religious hospitality, begged them to stop and share his *déjeuner*.

‘It is not much,’ he said, with an apologetic shrug and a depreciatory gesture of his open palms—‘an omelette—for it’s Friday—and a morsel of dried fish, washed down with a little blue wine of the country; but such as it is, messieurs, I trust you will do me the honour to partake of it.’

‘We shall be only too charmed, *mon père*,’ Le Marchant replied truthfully. ‘We haven’t sat down at a civilized table, or eaten bread, or tasted wine, since we came to Kabylie. It will be a welcome relief to us from that eternal *cous-cous*.’

In five minutes the breakfast duly appeared on the table—an omelette which might have made even Madame l’Administratrice herself less poignantly regret the Parisian cuisine, some *croquettes* of dry cod, most daintily flavoured, and a bottle of good red wine from the White Fathers’ own rich vineyards at the Maison Carré—to all which the two young Englishmen, long strangers to such luxury, and inured to Diego’s rough-and-ready methods of outdoor cookery, did ample justice. The bread, in particular, was highly commended—nice white little *petit pains* that would have done honour to the Viennese bakeries in Paris. Vernon Blake praised it so loudly, to the disparagement of *cous-cous*, that when they left the mission-house the good Father must needs press upon them the entire remainder of that day’s batch to take back with them to the village.

‘I’ll roll the loaves up in paper,’ he said, ‘and your Kabyle can carry them. Let me see; what have I got in the way of a newspaper? Ah, here’s yesterday’s *Dépêches Algériennes*.’

‘Better still,’ Le Marchant said, ‘for to tell you the truth, though we get letters occasionally when the villagers are going down to market at Tizi-Ouzou, we haven’t seen a newspaper of any sort for the last six weeks.’

So they returned to Beni-Merzoug with their bread and their paper, Le Marchant at least not a little saddened by the painful history of Meriem's father.

Meriem herself was waiting at the tent to meet them as they returned.

'I want you to see what I can do, Eustace,' she cried to Le Marchant, with almost childish delight. 'Vernon has lent me one of his books to try on, and I think now I can read English.'

Le Marchant took the book from her hand incredulously; it was a paper-covered edition of a popular novel. The girl glanced over his shoulder, and, to his great surprise, spelt out several lines, one after the other, with tolerable correctness. She made a hash of the proper names, to be sure, and of the long words that did not yet enter into her now daily widening English vocabulary; but as to words that she knew, she read them at sight with an ease and rapidity that fairly took Le Marchant's breath away.

'How on earth did you learn to do this, Meriem?' he cried, astonished. 'It's wonderful! wonderful!'

Meriem looked up at him with not unbecoming conscious pride.

'I was so ashamed of myself,' she said, 'that day when I couldn't read my father's English name in Vernon's picture, that I made up my mind I wouldn't wait another day or another minute without beginning to learn the letters of my father's language. So I borrowed one of Vernon's books, without telling you about it, and found a girl of our people who could teach me the names of all the letters, because, you see, she'd been taught by the priests at the school of St. Cloud, and they're the same as the French ones, though they sound a little different. I could read Kabyle already, of course, in Arabic letters, that I learnt for the Koran, and I think when you know how to read one language it must always be easy to read any other one. Besides, I thought I should be ashamed not to know if ever—well, if ever I should happen to go to England.'

Le Marchant smiled a pitying smile, and answered nothing.

'Besides, the book itself is so interesting,' Meriem went on, in an ecstasy. 'It tells you about how people live in

England. And now that I've read it, do you know, Eustace, I think I should like to live in England; the people seem all so peaceable and good there.'

'Why didn't you tell Vernon first?' Le Marchant asked, with a sidelong glance at the beautiful girl.

Meriem hesitated.

'Because . . . I don't know why . . . I can't explain it . . . but somehow I was shy of telling Vernon.'

There was a long pause, during which neither of them said anything to one another. Then Le Marchant, raising his eyes unsteadily from the ground with a stifled sigh, said suddenly:

'Was your father a good man, Meriem?'

Meriem started. 'He was the very best man that ever lived,' she answered earnestly, with the full fervour of confirmed conviction.

'And yet,' Le Marchant mused, half to himself, 'the English wanted to imprison him for forgery, and the French would have liked to shoot him for desertion.'

'Perhaps that was because he was so very good,' Meriem answered simply. 'Don't you think, Eustace, good people are always least understood and the most persecuted? Why, even the blessed Prophet himself had to fly from Mecca to avoid being killed by the wickedness of the people.'

Le Marchant could not resist an amused smile. The incongruity of the words on such English lips seemed so grotesque as to be almost ridiculous.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE STRANDS CONVERGE.

ON the platform outside the village, where the Beni-Merzoug held their weekly market, Vernon Blake stood sketching the buzzing group of white-robed natives who clustered beneath the shade of a great oak opposite, deep in eager conclave, as it appeared, on some important question of tribal business. A finer subject he had seldom found. Every gesture and attitude of the men was indeed eloquent; and the pose of the Amine, in particular, as he listened to and weighed each

conflicting argument, presented to the eye a perfect model of natural and unstudied deliberative dignity. Le Marchant, stretched carelessly at the painter's feet, had brought out with him the copy of the *Dépêches Algériennes* which the Père Baba had yesterday lent them. He was reading it aloud, translating as he went, with but a languid interest in the diplomatic rumours and Court news which its telegrams detailed with their usual tedious conciseness, when, turning a page to the advertisement columns, his eye was attracted suddenly by the appearance, in large Roman type, of that unknown name which had imprinted itself so deeply on their minds of late, the English name of Meriem's father! 'On demande des renseignements,' the advertisement ran, 'sur le nommé CLARENCE KNYVETT, Anglais.'

Le Marchant could hardly believe his eyes.

'Look here, Blake,' he exclaimed, with a little cry of surprise; 'just see what on earth this means, will you?'

Blake took the paper from his hand, and stared at it hard.

'What does it mean?' he said with a *whew*. 'I can't quite make it out. Two of them at once, too! It's really very singular.'

Le Marchant snatched back the little sheet from his friend in fresh astonishment.

'Two of them?' he cried. 'Why, so there are, actually. And both want to know the very same things—about Meriem's father.'

'Translate them,' Blake said.

And Le Marchant translated:

'Information wanted about one Clarence Knyvett, an Englishman, who is believed to have enlisted in the Third Chasseurs under the assumed name of Joseph Leboutillier, and to have hidden for some time as a deserter among the Kabyles of the Djurjura. If he or his representatives will address themselves to Iris Knyvett, 15, North Grove, Kensington, London, or to T. K. Whitmarsh, Esq., Old Square, Lincoln's Inn, equally in London, they may hear of something to their advantage.'

'A whole romance!' Blake exclaimed, with surprise, still going on with his sketching, but much interested.

'And here's the second,' Le Marchant continued, trans-

lating once more: "Any person who can supply certain information as to the death, with or without heirs, of Clarence Knyvett, otherwise Joseph Leboutillier, formerly a soldier of the Third Chasseurs, and supposed to have died in a skirmish in Kabylie, shall receive a reward of five hundred francs, on addressing himself to the undersigned, Harold Knyvett, Cheyne Row Club, Piccadilly, London, W., England.'

'What the dickens does it mean?' Blake asked, laying down his pencil for a moment, with a puzzled air.

'It means,' the naturalist answered slowly, 'that Meriem is the missing heir to a great fortune, and that she and Iris Knyvett, the Third Classic, must be somehow related to one another. When we left Algiers, Sir Arthur Knynett was still alive, for I saw his name in *Galignani*, at the English Club, among the list of visitors then lately arrived at Aix-les-Bains. It happened to attract me in connection with Miss Knyvett's success at Cambridge. Since that time Sir Arthur must have died, and Meriem must be wanted as his heiress and representative.'

'Lucky for you!' the artist cried, with a short little laugh. 'You didn't know you'd fallen in love with a young woman of property!'

'Lucky for you, rather,' Le Marchant retorted, by no means so gaily. 'You didn't know it was a young woman of property who'd fallen in love with you.'

'What shall you do about it?' Blake asked, after a brief pause, when the first shock of surprise had begun to pass away.

'Write to England at once,' the naturalist answered, with great promptitude.

'To which? To the fellow who offers twenty pounds reward, I suppose? If there's money going begging, you may as well come in for your share of it as any other fellow.'

'No,' Le Marchant replied, shaking his head with decision. 'To the lady, by all means.'

'Why so?'

'For many reasons. In the first place, because she's a woman, and will therefore be more kindly disposed to Meriem. In the second place, because she offers no reward,

and I shall therefore not so probably be suspected of mercenary motives. And in the third place, because, I don't know why, I feel instinctively the one advertisement means friendliness to Meriem, and the other advertisement means an enemy.'

'*Qui tient à son intérêt*, the Third Classic says,' Blake remarked musingly, turning the paper over again, and spelling it out for himself; 'while the other man says only *des renseignements indubitables sur la mort, avec ou sans héritiers, du nommé Clarence Knyvett*. It somehow sounds as if the girl wanted to find somebody somewhere to represent this man Clarence, deceased, and as if the other fellow, on the contrary, was anxious, if possible, to cut him off root and branch, without further to do about it.'

'That's exactly how I read it,' Le Marchant answered, with a satisfied nod. 'So we'll throw ourselves without reserve on Miss Knyvett's mercy.'

'Which Miss Knyvett?' Blake asked provokingly. 'Meriem, or the other one?'

'The other one, you know quite well, Vernon. Not a moment shall be lost. I'll write this very day direct to London.'

'You think she'll come in for Sir Arthur's money, then?'

'No, I don't. It's impossible. She has no legal title. That's why I propose to write to the lady rather than to the man. Mr. Harold Knyvett, whoever he may be, is certain to take a man's point of view about it. If the fortune's his, he'll do nothing for Meriem. We won't be able to work upon his feelings. But if it's the girl's—the Third Classic's, I mean—she's pretty sure to recognise the tie of blood, in spite of everything, and to make some handsome recognition of Meriem's moral claims upon her generosity.'

'Why moral claims only?' the painter asked, puzzled. 'Why shouldn't Meriem succeed to the property in due course if it's really hers? You see, they say they want to find the heirs of Clarence Knyvett or Joseph Leboutillier, who will hear of something that goes to their advantage. Surely a man's own daughter's his heir—or rather, his heiress. And that's just what the other fellow seems most afraid of; for the thing he clearly wants to pay twenty pounds for is proof that this man, Clarence Knyvett, died

without heirs, leaving him, Mr. Harold, to succeed to the property.'

'Exactly so,' Le Marchant answered, taking in the situation at a glance with his clear logical mind. 'A man's daughter's his heiress, of course; at least, for personalty, provided she's his daughter by the law of England. But the law of England, with its usual mediæval absurdity, takes no account of anything so unimportant as mere paternity or hereditary relationship; according to its theory, Meriem here is in no way related to her own father. It's grotesque, of course, but I'm afraid it's the fact. From the point of view of the law of England, she's a mere waif and stray, no more connected with her own family and her own friends than anybody else in England or in Kabylie.'

'How so?' the painter asked, in wondering surprise.

'Because,' Le Marchant answered, 'as Père Baba told us, her father and mother were only married by the Kabyle rite—that is to say, as Mahommedans marry. Now, Mahommedanism permits the institution of polygamy; and though the Kabyles themselves are not practical polygamists, having retained in that, as in so many other respects, in spite of Islam, their old Roman and European habits, yet, theoretically at least, and by Mahommedan law, a Kabyle has the right to marry four wives if he pleases. Hence, according to the law of England, a marriage with a Kabyle woman by the Mahommedan rite is a polygamous marriage. Such a marriage isn't recognised by our Courts—I've seen the case tried, and I know it to be so; and in the eye of our law, accordingly, Meriem herself is illegitimate, and has no sort of relationship with her own father.'

'But it's absurd; it's unjust!' Blake cried, in astonishment.

'What else do you expect,' his companion asked bitterly, 'from the law of England?'

'Why, look here!' Blake exclaimed again, with the ordinary impotent youthful indignation against the manifest wrongfulness of established custom, 'that's such rot, you know. There's no sort of question of polygamy in it at all. Doesn't Shakespeare say, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments"?''

'But Shakespeare would hardly be admitted as an authority of collateral value with Blackstone in an English Court,' Le Marchant answered, with a bitter smile.

'Well, take it by common-sense, then,' Vernon Blake went on excitedly. 'This man Knyvett, Meriem's father, took for his wedded wife a Kabyle woman, Halima, or whatever else they choose to call her, by the law of the country in which they lived, and was faithful to her only all the days of his lifetime. If that's not marriage, I don't know what is. He never married any other wife that I can hear of; and by the Kabyle custom he couldn't, or wouldn't, ever have done so. If he had, Mrs. Halima would have brought the house down about his ears, I'll bet you any money. These Kabyle women are unaccustomed to such proceedings. It was a monogamous marriage, if that's the proper word—and a jolly good word, too, supposing only it's in the right place—as much as any marriage any day in England. Hang it all, if that's English law, you know, I don't think very much of the wisdom of our ancestors.'

'Nevertheless,' Le Marchant replied, with a serious face, 'I'm quite sure I represent it correctly. The marriage being contracted under Mahommedan law, is, *ipso facto*, a polygamous marriage, whether a second wife be taken or not, and, as such, it's not recognised for a marriage at all, in the Christian sense, by the law of England. Meriem is therefore not legitimate, and not Clarence Knyvett's heiress at all. So what we've got to do on her behalf is merely to interest Miss Iris Knyvett in her as far as practicable, and to make the best terms we can possibly make for her. For my part, I shall be satisfied if the result of the incident is merely to establish communications between Meriem and her English relatives, and so, perhaps, in the end, to save the poor girl from the hateful fate of being handed over, bound hand and foot, to either Ahmed or Hussein; to prevent that, I would do almost anything.'

'Even to marrying her!' cried Blake lightly.

'Even to marrying her!' Le Marchant repeated, with a sigh.

As if it were so easy a thing to marry Meriem.

'And will you tell Miss Knyvett all this?' Blake asked,

after a moment. 'I mean about the marriage being polygamous, and so forth?'

'Certainly not!' Le Marchant said, with much firmness. 'Let them find out all that for themselves, if they will. Mr. T. K. Whitmarsh, of Old Square, Lincoln's Inn, whoever he may be, may be safely trusted to arrive at that conclusion fast enough for himself. I, for my part, hold a brief for Meriem, and what I want is merely to enlist your Third Classic's sympathy as much as I can on her behalf. I shall dwell only upon the blood-relationship, and on her goodness and beauty, and on the hunted-down life of that poor man, her father. I shall try to make Miss Knyvett feel that the girl (as I suppose) is, after all, at least her cousin.'

'Work upon her feelings, in short,' the painter suggested, smiling.

'Work upon her feelings, if she's got any,' Le Marchant responded, with a hurried glance towards the Amine's cottage; 'let her know that though she may be a Third Classic at Cambridge, there's one of her own blood and kith and kin over here in Grande Kabylie who's as fine and as grand and as noble-minded a woman as she can be any day. That's why I mean to write to the girl herself, and not to the lawyer, who, of course, as a man of business, would have no bowels of compassion to speak of.'

'My dear Le Marchant, your infatuation about that girl's becoming really ridiculous,' Vernon Blake said, laughing. 'It's a good thing for her that it's you, not me'—yes, dear Mr. Critic, he said *me* instead of *I*, and I won't take it upon me to correct his grammar—'who have to write to Miss Knyvett about her. *I* couldn't say so much in her favour.'

'Perhaps not,' Le Marchant answered, a little contemptuously.

And he remembered those pregnant words of a great thinker: 'Each man sees in the universe around him what each man brings the faculty of seeing.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

FRIENDS IN COUNCIL.

VERNON BLAKE's sketch of the white-robed natives under the tree opposite was a lively and vigorous one; as well it might be, indeed; for could the two young Englishmen only have heard and understood the conversation that was passing in low Kabyle whispers between those idyllic-looking men under the shady oak-boughs, their hearts might have stood still within them for horror. The South plays with death and blood. The Kabyle village council, in open-air moot under the sacred oak assembled, was debating in full form no less high and important a question of policy than the total extinction of French rule in Eastern Algeria.

'Then all we have to do ourselves,' the Amine was remarking, in soft earnest tones, as Blake jotted him down with upstretched arm so vividly in his sketch-book, 'is to kill every man, woman, and child of the infidels down yonder at St. Cloud, with Allah's blessing. The rest we may leave to the tribes to accomplish.'

'That is all we have to do, son of the Faithful,' the eldest marabout answered, with a wave of his hand towards the high mountains. 'The Beni-Yenni and the Aith-Menguellath will take care for their part to crush out the garrison up above at Fort National.'

'You are fools to try,' a strong and stalwart middle-aged Kabyle in a red hood, standing a little apart from the group by himself, remarked quietly, with a sneer on his face. 'The French can crush you as a camel's foot crushes ants in the desert. They crushed you so in the disgrace of 1251'—for by that name the great but abortive insurrection of 1870 is universally known to the Moslems of Algeria.

'Hark at Amzian!' the Amine cried contemptuously. 'He's half an unbeliever himself, I know, because he was a Spahis, and served in France. The women of the infidels made great eyes at him. They have shaken his faith. He puts no trust in Allah. He is always discouraging the true believers from any attempt to recover their freedom.'

'I am no infidel,' Amzian answered angrily, with a toss of his head, folding his bernouse around him with pride as

he spoke. 'I am no infidel; I am a true Moslem; **the** Prophet has no more faithful follower than me; but I have been to France, and I know the French, how many they are. Their swarms are as locusts when plague-time comes. They would crush you as the camel crushes ants in the sand. Why, the people of Paris alone, I tell you, **Amine**, are like flies on the carcase, more numerous than all the tribes in Kabylie.'

'Allah is great,' the Amine retorted piously. 'The least among His people are stronger, if it be His will, than thousands of infidels.'

'He didn't help us in 1251,' Amzian suggested, with some reserve.

'Ay, but the time has now come, so the marabouts say,' the Amine responded, with a rapid glance towards one of them, 'when Islam is to rise all together in its might against the hordes of the infidel. Has it not come to your ears, unbeliever, how the Christians have been driven by the Mahdi out of the Soudan? How the enemies of the Faith hardly hold Suakim? How Khartoum has been taken by the hosts of Allah? The day of the great deliverance is at hand. Islam shall no longer obey the dogs of Christians.'

'We shall never drive the dogs of Christians out of Kabylie,' the sceptical Amzian murmured once more, with secular hard-headedness, 'as long as the French are drilled and armed and officered as they are, while we are but a horde, and as long as they hold the keys of Fort National.'

'Let us ask Hadji Daood,' the Amine ejaculated, much shocked at such rationalistic latitudinarianism. 'He has been to Mecca, and has seen the world. He knows better than any of us, who stay at home in Kabylie, whether these things are so or not.'

The meeting applauded with a silent clicking of some fifty tongues. The intimate knowledge of French internal affairs to be acquired during a coasting voyage from Bougie down the Tunis seaboard to Alexandria and Jeddah, naturally gave the Hadji's opinion no little weight upon this abstruse question.

'Hadji Daood ben Marabet,' the Amine said solemnly, interrogating the old man as a new Parliamentary hand might interrogate a veteran of many Sessions, 'do you think,

or do you not think, the French are so very strong that they could crush us as a camel crushes a desert ant-hill?

Hadji Daood ben Marabet wagged his gray old head solemnly, in the sight of the meeting, till the caftan nearly fell off his bald shaved pate.

'I have been to Mecca, Amine,' he answered, with infinite dignity, 'and seen the kingdoms of the world and all their glory; and this is the word I have to tell you: the might of the infidel is as dust in the balance to the might of the faithful and the servants of Allan.'

The Amine glanced triumphantly at the annihilated Amzian, who retired, abashed, into the shade of his ber-nouse.

'But the French are so strong,' he murmured still, with the native irrepressibility of the born heretic, 'that they will crush us all out as they crushed out Mokrani, who fought against them in the great insurrection.'

The Amine took no more notice of the discomfited and discredited ex-European soldier. Why should he give himself such airs, indeed, and pose as an authority, merely because he had been beaten at Sarrebrouck and at Gravelotte?

'It is clear, then,' the Amine said, continuing his discourse, 'that Allah is going to deliver the infidels into the hands of His people. Our part in the work is to attack St. Cloud, and slay every man, woman, and child—but, above all, to kill Madame l'Administratrice.'

'Why her in particular?' Ahmed asked, with a smile. 'Is she so much worse, then, than all other Christians?'

'She is a Christian,' the Amine answered, 'and that alone should suffice. When the marabouts proclaim a Jihad, a holy war, every Christian in Islam is alike our enemy. But the woman of the high heels is the worst of them all. Was it not she who called us "pigs of Kabyles"? Was it not she who destroyed the shrine of the great saint, Si Mahommed Said with the Two Tombs, to erect in its place a dancing-pavilion in her own garden? Was it not she who forbade our women to come and weep on Fridays at the spot where the blessed Sheikh El-Haddad, the blacksmith, poured out his great life for Kabylie and Islam, because their wailing interrupted her peace when she read the vile

books, full of orgies and wickedness, she brings over from Paris ?’

‘And when our people would have taken the stones of the shrine to erect them again here at Beni-Merzoug,’ Hadji Daoood cried, doddering, ‘it was the woman of the high heels who refused to give us them, because she wanted the tiles from the holy place to adorn her bed-chamber, and the carved marble from the pillars and the coping-stone to make the base of her wanton summer-house.’

‘Therefore for this,’ the Amine went on piously, with a solemn ring, ‘we will dash out the brains of the woman with the high heels against the marble parapet of her own summer-house, and give her bones to the jackals to eat on the shrine of Si Mahommed Said.’

‘And every soul that lives in her house,’ the Hadji droned out, waxing stronger with the excitement, ‘we will kill and destroy in honour of Allah and of Mahommed His Prophet.’

‘So be it,’ the Amine assented, with a grave nod.

The Kabyles around bent their heads to the ground in token of approval.

‘Hush!’ the Amine cried, in an authoritative voice, looking round him suddenly, and perceiving a diversion. ‘The spirit of prophecy has come over the marabout.’

As he spoke, a marabout stood out for one moment from the busy throng, his eyes wild and fierce, and his mouth foaming. He turned himself round once or twice slowly on one foot, as on a pivot; then waxing faster and faster as the excitement increased, he whirled round and round violently for several minutes, with a rapid and angry swaying movement. At last he paused, looked round him in ecstasy, and drove a pin through his outstretched tongue with a face free from all signs of pain or emotion. As they looked, he began to recite, deep down in his throat, a sort of droning song in a long, irregular, native metre :

‘The Frenchmen came ; they said, *Bonjour* ; in an evil day they said *Good day* to us.

The Frenchmen came ; they said, *Bonsoir* ; ’twas a sleepless night when they said *Good night* to us.

The Frenchmen came ; they said, *Merci* ; we have little to thank them for teaching us *Thank you*.

The Frenchmen came ; they said to us, *Frère* ; with brotherly love have they kicked us and bullied us.

The Frenchmen came ; they called us *Cochon* ; dogs and mules had more honour than we have.

The word of Allah came to His marabouts : Stir up My people against the dogs of infidels.

Whom shall we stir up, oh, All Wise, oh, All Powerful ? The sons of the Kabyles against the sons of the Frenchmen.

The Beni-Yenni to the gates of Fort National ; the Beni-Merzoug to Saint Cloud in the valley.

Slay every soul in Saint Cloud, ye Beni-Merzoug ; slay, and obtain the blessing of Allah.

Slay, above all, her of the high heels ; bring down her proud head in the dust of her highway.

Slay every soul that comes under her roof ; the desecrated roof of Si Mahommed Said.

Let those who robbed my dead saint be requited ; let those who dishonoured his holy bones be punished.

Slay, saith Allah, by the voice of His marabouts, slay—slay with the sword ; kill all, and spare not.'

The marabout sat down, collapsing suddenly, as if the fire of inspiration had all at once been withdrawn from him. The pin still held his tongue between his teeth. The foam at his mouth was reddened with blood. The Kabyles around looked on admiringly.

There was a short pause, during which no one spoke aloud, though many whispered ; then Amzian the unbelieving asked, somewhat incredulously :

'And when will you begin this Jehad against the infidel ?'

'That is as Allah wills,' the Amine responded, bowing his head. 'We will wait and be governed by the event that arises. Events crowd thickly in these latter days. The house of the infidels is divided against itself. Have you not heard that there will soon be new wars again between the people of *Oui-Oui* and the people of *Ja-Ja* ?'

'It is true,' Amzian assented, 'that the French and the Germans are likely to have war when he who is now Sultan of Germany bites the dust in the ground before Allah.'

'When that time comes,' the Amine said solemnly, 'let every believer draw sword for Islam.'

'So be it,' the assembly assented once more, with faces all turned with one accord towards Mecca.

At that point the meeting was about to break up in-

formally, when Amzian, with a backward jerk of his thumb, called attention to the presence of strangers in the gallery.

‘How about *them*?’ he asked, with a sniff, indicating by the contemptuous movement of his hand the spot where Le Marchant and Blake were sitting.

‘They are English,’ the Amine replied; ‘they are not French. The English are good. I know their mind. My brother Yusuf was himself an Englishman.’

‘In a Jihad,’ Ahmed, Meriem’s rejected suitor, remarked, with the air of a man who propounds an indifferent abstract principle, ‘all infidels alike are commanded to be slain, without fear or favour, without lot or exception.’

‘True,’ the Amine retorted; ‘but the English are good; I have heard that they are just to Moslems in Egypt.’

‘When I was at Mecca,’ the Hadji interposed, leaning upon his staff with his trembling hands, ‘I met many Moslems from Sind and Ind, who swore by the Prophet’s beard they would as soon live under the Sultana of the English as under the Caliph of the Faithful himself at Stamboul.’

‘But if these infidels find out they will spoil all,’ Hussein grumbled from a corner. ‘They see far too much as it is of our women.’

‘Meriem is their interpreter, and speaks their tongue,’ the Amine interposed, in a deprecating voice. ‘They pay me well for the milk they buy, and for the grain, and for the *cous-cous*, and for the rent due for the site of their encampment. I have given a fresh coverlet to the shrine of our Saint out of part of the rent they have paid us for encamping.’

‘If this thing gets about among the women,’ Ahmed observed, with a sinister scowl, ‘there will be no keeping a word of it from the girl Meriem.’

‘And if Meriem hears,’ Hussein continued, taking up the parable, ‘she will tell it all to her friend, the painter of pictures.’

‘We are Moslems,’ the Amine observed, drawing his *bernouse* symbolically close around him in a manner expressive of profound secrecy. ‘We do not blab to our women like the Christians. We can keep our own counsel. We are men, not children; of Islam, not infidels.’

‘Let no man speak a word of all this to his wedded wife,’ the Hadji cried, raising one skinny palsied forefinger. ‘If it reaches the French, we shall know it was the English; if it reaches the English, we shall know it was Meriem; if it reaches Meriem, we shall find out what traitor’s wife has told her. And whoever it is, French, English, or Moslem, they all shall die, by the beard of the Prophet.’

‘What an impressive attitude!’ Blake cried, looking up. ‘He’s finer even than the dervish fellow we saw at Algiers. I think I’ll just stop and sketch in the old boy while you go and write that letter, Le Marchant.’

CHAPTER XIX.

SOUTHWARD HO!

It was with conscious pride, by no means appropriate to a political economist of the advanced school, that Iris Knyvett found herself one bright November morning driving up the slopes of Mustapha Supérieur in her own carriage to her own villa of Sidi Aia, on the El Biar road, just above Algiers.

Iris had had a hard fight for it, of course, with Uncle Tom. When Eustace Le Marchant’s letter first arrived, Uncle Tom, wary by long practice in the Probate and Divorce Division, scented mischief on the breeze in the very tone of its cautious wording. ‘You’re going to raise up a Tichborne claimant against your own estate, my child, exactly as I told you,’ Uncle Tom said, with reproachful earnestness. ‘The man’s an impostor, or else a fortune-hunter; that’s what’s the matter. Either he’s running this alleged daughter of your uncle Clarence as a claimant to the estate in order to blackmail you—the Tichborne game; or else he’s running her for his own purposes, meaning, in the end, to hand her over your property and then marry her. The proof of it’s clear, for I’ve taken the trouble to ascertain the fact that he didn’t answer your cousin Harold’s advertisement at all, which appeared on the very same date with your own, side by side, in the Algerian newspapers;

and why should the fellow refuse the offer of twenty pounds reward, payable on demand, unless he had some ulterior object in view, I should like to know, Iris ?

‘Perhaps he thought me the likeliest person to do justice to the girl,’ Iris suggested timidly.

‘Tut, tut, tut,’ Uncle Tom responded, growing redder than ever. ‘Justice to the girl, indeed ! What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba ? He’s casting a sprat to catch a whale ; that’s the long and short of it. A cock-and-bull story as ever I heard in my born days. If I were you, my child, I’d take no more notice of it. If the young woman of dusky complexion and doubtful antecedents chooses to prosecute her shadowy claim, let her come to England—the Courts are open and there are Deputies—and let her prosecute it reasonably by her attorney-at-law, with all due formalities, in the ordinary manner. Then we shall know exactly how to deal with her. Deny everything, and insist upon proof. That’s the way to meet it. Make her explain her father’s survival, his change of name, his marriage, his decease, his unaccountable intestacy. Make her produce her mother’s marriage lines, her certificate of birth, her vaccination marks, her papers generally. Till then, we don’t need to trouble our heads one jot or tittle about the matter. We don’t want to get up a case against ourselves for the benefit of a supposititious young woman in Africa.’

But, unfortunately for Uncle Tom, he had a client to deal with in this case who was not to be put off with forensic generalizations, or legal quibbles of the most respectable antiquity.

‘If the girl really exists, and if she’s really, Uncle Clarence’s daughter,’ Iris stuck to it firmly, ‘then she, not I, is heiress to the estate ; and I won’t rob her, not even for you, uncle dear, much as I love you.’

‘*Daughter*,’ Uncle Tom remarked sententiously, ‘is in English law a word of a precisely definite and circumscribed meaning. It means, connotes, implies, or designates lawful female issue of his body begotten. And when we say lawful, we mean, of course, born in wedlock, in Christian wedlock, of a kind recognised by Act of Parliament, or (within certain limits) by the *lex loci* of the country where the marriage was actually solemnized. Now, supposing

even your Uncle Clarence did really desert, run away from his colours, and marry a young woman of dusky complexion and doubtful faith, in some out-of-the-way corner of the North African mountains, that's nothing to us. The offspring and representative of the dusky young woman thus irregularly annexed has got to prove, in the first place, that her putative father, deceased, lived long enough to survive your late Uncle Alexander. If he didn't do that, be she ten times over his lawful daughter, not a penny does she get by the singular terms of your grandfather's will—and a pretty mess your grandfather made of it. But if he did survive his elder brother, then and in that case there still arises the further question—Did your uncle Clarence ever marry the dusky young woman aforesaid, of North African origin, in any sense recognised by the Christian religion and the common and statute law of this country? That he did so marry her is in the highest degree, I think, improbable—to put it mildly, in the highest degree improbable—and if he didn't, why, then and in that case the dusky young woman number two, his natural offspring, has nothing more to do with you, by the law of England, than any other dusky young woman, assorted, of the same race, place, and religion.'

But Iris, oddly enough, with true Knyvett obstinacy, held out to the last for her own view of this ethical question. She boldly maintained, against so great an authority as Uncle Tom himself, that if Meriem was Uncle Clarence's daughter, then, the law of England to the contrary notwithstanding, Meriem must be her own first cousin. She further maintained that, as a biological fact, a father and his children were indubitably connected one with the other by physical origin. She refused to believe that the law of England itself could possibly annul that primitive underlying law of nature. And she insisted with incredible and most annoying persistence that as soon as the weather grew cool enough in Africa she would herself proceed in person to Algeria to see the girl whom she believed to be her cousin, and to investigate the passive claim set forth on her behalf to Uncle Arthur's property. 'For if it's justly hers,' Iris said most resolutely, 'nothing on earth would induce me to keep her out of it.'

So the end of it all was that early in November, Iris herself, with her mother and uncle, crossed over to Algiers, as the eminent Q.C. preferred to phrase it, 'on their fool's errand.' It was hard to leave England at such a moment, indeed; but Uncle Tom felt that if any tomfoolery, as he called it, was likely to go on, it was best at least he should be on the spot to prevent it from taking the wildest flights of Quixotic extravagance. So, with a very bad grace, he consented to come over, consoling himself, at any rate, with the thought that Iris would thus take personal possession of Sidi Aia, and that if the thing was to be investigated at all it was best it should be investigated by a competent person familiar, by long experience, with the practice of the Probate and Divorce Division.

The fickle Mediterranean used them kindly; and it was at three in the morning of a clear starlight night that the good ship *Ville de Naples* of the *Compagnie Transatlantique* brought them fairly in sight of the shores of Africa. Mrs. Knyvett had retired early to her cabin for the voyage, and would not have risen from that safe retreat had Mont Blanc, Niagara, and the Golden Horn pressed themselves simultaneously at a single burst upon her maturer vision. But Iris was young, and youth is impetuous, even when duly chastened and restrained by three years' diligent pruning at Girton. So the Third Classic rose up in haste at Uncle Tom's muffled report of 'Land in sight!' and went up on deck in a thick ulster for her first glimpse of Africa and golden joys.

And what a glimpse it was, that night arrival, as the steamer ploughed her way slowly round the corner of the mole into the great dim harbour! In front, a vast rising mass of streets and gas lamps, clambering in endless steps and stages up the steep face of a mysterious mountain. On either hand, a small fleet of dancing boats, crowded with strange Arabs in their Oriental dress, all shouting and calling in loud guttural voices. To right and left, dark ranges of hills, silhouetted vaguely against the deep African sky, and crowded with faint white specks of villas. Everywhere lights that danced and quivered on the rippling water; everywhere bustle and noise and confusion; everywhere the strange sense of a foreign land—not foreign like France, or

Germany, or Italy, but Southern and African and vivid and Moslem.

Iris waited on deck till the day dawned, and saw that wonderful town of Algiers—the ‘pearl set in emeralds,’ as the Arab poets loved to call it—swim slowly into ken in the gray light of morning. It was a beautiful sight—a sight to be remembered and treasured through a long lifetime. First of all, a white solid mass of marble detached itself by degrees in clear relief from the background of the dark mountain behind it. Tier after tier, it rose to the sky as if hewn in one block from the quarries of Carrara. Streets or alleys there were none to behold; the flat-topped houses, each square as a die, clustered close in one tangled continuous block, as though not even a needle could be thrust in between them. Dark alleys threaded that labyrinth, no doubt, but so tortuous as to be hidden by the overhanging houses and projecting doorways. For twenty minutes these solid white steps alone were distinctly visible; then bit by bit, as the light grew clearer, the picture began to resolve itself piecemeal into its component elements. In the foreground, a public square, stately with tall date-palms; a snow-white mosque, with big round dome, and tile-faced minaret; a splendid French boulevard, arcaded like Paris; a range of vast and costly quays, thronged with the commerce of Marseilles and of Liverpool. In the background, the congested Arab town, rising up like a staircase to the huge dismantled citadel of the Deys that crowned the summit of a spur of the Sahel. To the right, the sea; to the left, the smiling slope of Mustapha, frequent with villas, Moorish, French, or English, each lost in the brilliant green of luxuriant gardens. Toulon below, Beyrout above, Torquay and Cannes and Stamboul beyond—that was the strange cosmopolitan picture that Iris Knyvett beheld before her.

Uncle Tom had telegraphed from Marseilles to the people at Sidi Aia, so everything was in waiting at the quay to receive them. The invaluable Maltese who acts as commissioner arranged to see their luggage through the Customs, and follow them up with it in due course; so the Knyvetts and Uncle Tom had nothing to do but to get into their carriage and drive up quietly to their own villa.

Iris was, in principle at least, a Socialist. ‘We are all

Socialists now,' a big man has said, so I suppose there's no great harm in confessing the fact openly. But the female heart is fickle on principle; and when the Third Classic beheld the gorgeous Arab coachman, who sat on the box, with his braided blue jacket, his maize-coloured girdle, his full white trousers, and his crimson fez, she felt in her heart it would be hard indeed to give up all these for the service of humanity. They rolled along smoothly through the crowded streets, past Arabs on donkeys and Arabs on foot, in every variety of dirt and griminess; past Moorish women, muffled to the eyes, and gliding silently by the wondering infidels; past the Kabyle market in the open square, alive with Oriental bustle and commotion; through the Porte d'Isly, with its curious collection of maimed and halt beggars; and up the long ramping gradients of the road that leads by slow degrees to the suburb of Mustapha. It seemed an endless drive, in the cool morning air, with an interminable succession of country Arabs coming in to market on their mules and their donkeys. Villas innumerable lined the road, embowered in thickets of bamboo or date-palm, and draped with great clustering masses of Banksia roses or crimson Bougainvillea. Some of them showed Moorish architecture at its best, with their beautiful arcades and their stately doorways. Iris hoped in her heart Sidi Aia would turn out like one of these, and not a great staring square French château, like the house on the hilltop, with no sense or tinge of local colouring, so utterly out of place with all its natural and artificial surroundings.

At the little Colonne Voirol they reached the summit, and swept sharply round into the road to El-Biar. In two minutes more, Iris's heart beat high with delicious hope, as the carriage turned into the courtyard of the loveliest and most native-looking Moorish house they had yet beheld upon that delightful hillside.

What a court it was, that shady vestibule! A marble fountain spurted in the midst, set about with tall arums and graceful water-weeds. Orange-trees and palms grew inside in clumps; an open arcade of horseshoe arches, with twisted marble columns of antique workmanship, ran entirely round it in an Oriental quadrangle. The floor was covered with dainty old tiles: a string-course of the same, in still lovelier

patterns, set off the pediment of the arcade above with their exquisite beauty. It was a dream of delight, come true by accident: a glorious dream, too good for solid earth: the sort of home one sees in one's fancy in the Arabian Nights, but never hopes or expects to come across as a fact in this workaday world of prosaic realities.

Iris mounted, awestruck, and too full for speech, from the uncovered court into the inner entrance-hall. It was a second courtyard, somewhat smaller than the first, but covered over above with a glass roof, so as to form an ante-room or central focus to the villa. A double arcade ran round it, above and below, both of delicate Saracenic arches, but the lower one open through all its length, while a balustrade of richly-carved woodwork formed a fitting parapet for the upper gallery, stretching in a line from pillar to pillar, and just high enough for a person to lean upon comfortably. The floor was of marble, covered with rich old Oriental rugs: tiles still more priceless than those of the outer court accentuated the structural lines of the building. From the *étagères* on the walls gleamed curious old trays of wrought brass, inlaid with Arabic inscriptions in graven silver; the niches in the wall, formed by marble slabs beneath the graceful flat arch peculiar to Algiers, were decorated with exquisite pieces of native pottery, Kabyle and Tangierine, or from the Aurès mountains.

Iris's heart swelled high at the sight, with the pride of possession. At that moment, if the truth must be told, her waning Socialism had dwindled away by rapid stages to what her Cambridge friends would, no doubt, have described as a negative quantity. It had reached vanishing-point. The deceitfulness of riches was too much for her principles.

On the short flight of steps that led from the outer to the inner court, two old women stood, with smiling faces, to welcome Iris to her new home.

'You are Zélie, I think,' she said to one of them timidly, in her boarding-school French, a broken dialect that sat not unbecomingly on those pretty lips.

And Zélie, proud that her name should be remembered by the grand young lady, answered fervently:

'I am Zélie, mademoiselle, and glad to welcome *une dame si aimable* to the walls of Sidi Aia.'

‘And you’re Sarah, I suppose,’ Iris went on in English to the other old woman, taking her hand in hers, and grasping it cordially

‘Yes, my lady, I’m Sarah,’ the Englishwoman answered, returning the grasp with sudden warmth. ‘God bless your pretty face, and your sweet young eyes, my dear! They told us you’d wear a pair of blue spectacles, and be able to talk nothing but Greek and Latin.’

‘Iris,’ Mrs. Knyvett remarked severely, shocked at such familiarity on the very threshold of their Algerian experiences, ‘don’t you think, my child, we’d better go on and see the drawing-room?’

‘If you like, darling mother,’ Iris answered, with a bright smile, ‘though I’ve seen enough already to drive me frantic.’

And in three minutes more she was stretched at full length upon the big window seat with the Tlemçen rug, looking out through the beautiful little Moorish arches, past the waving date-palms and tall yuccas of the garden, to the blue bay that shimmered with silver in the morning sun, and the snow-clad peaks of the Djurjura in the distance. Nay, more; to crown all, for an Englishwoman’s heart, old Sarah had brought them up a cup of good strong English tea, with cream complete, on an antique tray with blue porcelain cups, set out on an inlaid ebony and ivory Damascus table. Bagdad and Cairo swam before her eyes. Iris’s heart was too full to speak. ‘*Nil non laudabile vidi*,’ she murmured to herself. Socialism for the moment was at a distinct discount. A house like this was too beautiful, surely, for Dives to share with that ignorant and tasteless fellow, Lazarus.

CHAPTER XX.

AWAY TO KABYLIE.

At Sidi Aia the Knyvetts and Uncle Tom spent four or five days most enjoyably for themselves—as indeed well they might, for a more charming home exists not even on the sunlit slopes of Mustapha Supérieur. Iris, for her part, was never tired of wandering through the beautiful garden—her

own garden—oh, most unsocialistic but most natural thought!—admiring the lilies, and the orchids, and the scarlet amaryllises, and the rich profusion of her own namesake irises. Though it was mid-November, the beds still blossomed gay with endless flowers; the rich bloom of the loquat-trees perfumed the heavy air, and the delicate bells of the great white African clematis hung in long festoons from every straggling bough on the hillside opposite. Iris had never seen such wild luxuriance of sub-tropical foliage before; the walks in the grounds of Sidi Aia itself, relieved by glimpses of the other neighbouring white Moorish villas, with their flat roofs and their horseshoe arcades, scattered over the green slopes on every side, transported her mentally, on some enchanted carpet, to the dreams of her childhood and the terraces of the good Haroun-al-Rashid.

But, seductive as Sidi Aia proved to the economic ideas of the Third Classic, and subversive of all the good socialistic opinions she had carried away with her from the Cambridge lecture-rooms, it nevertheless did not prevent her from realizing the fact—the sad, sad fact—that her first business, now she had got to Africa, was to find out the truth about this girl Meriem. The moment, to be sure, was unpropitious for such thoughts. In the garden at Sidi Aia, Iris confessed to herself, not without sundry internal blushes, that it would be hard to give up all these lovely things to the rightful heir, if the rightful heir should prove to be indeed this vague, shadowy, half-African cousin in the recesses of Kabylie. Till she came to Algiers, she had never fully felt what wealth implied; now that she saw how much of the beautiful and graceful it could buy or keep, she was loath at heart to shuffle it off too easily.

Nevertheless, that uncomfortable Knyvett conscience of hers drove her on, in spite of her own unwillingness, to inquire into the whole case as presented for Meriem. They must stop at Mustapha for a few days only, to rest after their long and hurried journey, and must then go off on their expedition to Kabylie.

So, on the third morning of their stay at Sidi Aia, the imperious young heiress bundled Uncle Tom unceremoniously into town by main force to make full inquiries of Sir Arthur's agent as to the best way of proceeding to the mountains,

and the nature of the accommodation a Christian party might expect when it got there.

'Try to find out a nice hotel, there's a dear,' she said caressingly; 'and arrange to go as fast as we can to this place on the hills to hunt up Miss Meriem.'

Thus exhorted, Uncle Tom set off with sore misgivings, but as in duty bound; for he felt he was but clay in the hands of the potter before that clever, self-willed, coaxing little Iris. While he was gone, his niece went out with old Sarah for a stroll in the garden once more—she could have passed a lifetime in that lovely garden—and being still a woman, though a Girton graduate, she there pursued her sociological investigations at full leisure into the manners and customs of the adjacent proprietors.

'And who lives in that great white house on the left, Sarah?' she asked with unaffected feminine curiosity; 'the house where the three ladies in white morning-dresses stand at the window so much with their hair let down, and make mysterious signs to the Arabs in the vineyard?'

Good old Sarah laughed a quiet little laugh. 'Why, that's Dr. Yate-Westbury's,' she said with some reluctance, 'and those ladies you see at the windows his patients.'

'What! Not the great mad-doctor?' Iris cried with a start.

'Mad doctor! Well, yes, that's just about the truth of it. Mad he is, if you give me the word. They're all of 'em as mad as their patients, the mad-doctors. Dr. Yate-Westbury—his particular form of madness is Algiers. He thinks Algiers is good for everything, from paralysis or apoplexy to pain in the little finger. Have you got consumption? Then go to Algiers. No place on earth like Algiers for the lungs. Air's tonic, bracing, and highly exhilarating. Can't you sleep at nights? Then go to Algiers. No place on earth like Algiers for sleep. Air's sedative, soothing, and extremely unexciting. Are you sound in your mind? Then go to Algiers. The very place to give you rest and amusement without undue over-stimulation. Are you going off your head? Then go to Algiers. The very place to give you change and variety, with a new type of life and Oriental scenery. That's how he goes on. He's a specialist, he is—a specialist with a vengeance. He's got but one treatment

for all diseases. His diagnosis, poor dear Sir Arthur used to say, is, "You're wrong in your chumps," and his therapeutics are, "and Algiers 'll cure you.'"

'A mild form of mania,' Iris answered, smiling at the old woman's unexpected command of the recondite resources of the English language.

'Yes, my dear, but there's method in his madness, too,' old Sarah answered, with a wise look in her eyes. 'He makes his living out of it, mad or sane. . . He takes in patients at three guineas a day, and he has land to sell for eligible building-sites on the road to El-Biar.'

'You know too much, Sarah,' Iris answered with a laugh. 'You're quite a cynic. Cynicism's a thing I always dread. If you talk like that, I shall be afraid to say another word to you.'

By second breakfast-time, Uncle Tom returned, much fatigued, from town, very red-faced, and mentally flustered.

'Well, Iris,' he said, mopping his forehead with his famous red silk handkerchief—that handkerchief dreaded by many a nervous witness—'this is a pretty wild-goose chase, indeed, you've brought upon us! Talk about an hotel! Says the girl: "A nice hotel, uncle!" Why, Watson assures me there's not a European house, good, bad, or indifferent, within five miles of the place where Clarence Knyvett's alleged daughter is said to live; and these two young vagabonds who hunted the Claimant out for your edification camp out themselves, *à la belle étoile*, he tells me, in a canvas tent, on the top of a mountain. There's a style of life, indeed, for an elderly barrister! Pretty sort of mess this you've gone and got us in!'

'Now, don't flare up, there's a dear!' Iris answered soothingly, stroking his arm. 'I suppose we shall have to camp out, too; that's all there is to be said about it. In a climate like this, and in fine weather, camping out must be simply delicious; and so romantic to tell the girls about, you know, when one goes back again home to England.'

'Romantic!—rheumatic, you mean!' Uncle Tom cried angrily—for he hated romance with all his heart; he had seen too much of that sort of thing in the annals of the Probate and Divorce Division. 'Your mother's bronchitis would never allow it. Besides, there are panthers and

jackals and heaven knows what, Watson tells me; centipeds and scorpions crawl over you as you sleep, and tarantulas drop on to your bald head as you recline at your ease in your own quarters. Added to all which, the Kabyles are in a very discontented state—smouldering, smouldering, and he thinks an insurrection might break out any day.'

'I don't mind panthers,' Iris murmured, with a face somewhat damped by incipient disappointment; 'and I rather prefer scorpions than otherwise, but I must confess I should draw a line myself at a native insurrection.'

'Most insubordinate people, according to Watson,' Uncle Tom continued, rubbing his hands, and improving his opportunity as soon as found. 'Might cut your throat and your mamma's any evening. Perfect savages, it seems, in their frightful ways—perfect savages!'

'But couldn't we go and stop with Meriem?' Iris asked innocently.

Uncle Tom held up his hands in unutterable dismay. 'Impossible! my child,' he cried. 'Impossible! impossible! You'd have to pig it with the goats and the cattle. There's not a house in Kabylie fit for a Christian to live in, everybody says, except at two places, called St. Cloud and Fort National. St. Cloud's the nearest post to the village where the dusky young lady of African origin has pitched her tent, and Watson assures me, if we *must* go to Kabylie, which he strongly deprecates, the only practicable thing to do is to stop with the wife of the Administrator of the settlement.'

'But we can't invite ourselves!' Iris cried aghast.

'Well, Watson thinks,' Uncle Tom continued, much against the grain, but urged by an inward sense of duty to disclose the facts, 'that the lady in question would be only too glad to get the chance of having us, she's so badly off, in those remote parts, for European society. She's a gay little body, it seems, of Parisian proclivities and much intelligence, who's been buried alive in a hole among the mountains for heaven knows how long; and she's only too glad to get anybody to stay with her who'll bring her up the last Algerian gossip and the newest patterns of Paris fashions.'

'I'm afraid,' Iris said, glancing down at her own neat and simple tailor-made costume, 'I shall hardly satisfy

her requirements in that respect; but how can we manage to get an introduction to her?’

‘Oh, that’s done already,’ Uncle Tom replied, with some conscious pride in the successful carrying out of his unwilling mission. ‘Watson’s given me a letter in due form to the lady’s husband. He knows him well. Here it is, you see: *‘A M. l’Administrateur de la Commune Mixte de St. Cloud-en-Kabylie.’*

‘What’s a Commune Mixte?’ Iris asked, examining it.

‘A mixed community, I suppose,’ Uncle Tom answered with a certain tartness. ‘At any rate, we won’t get our throats cut there; for Watson says, even if there’s a rising, St. Cloud can hold its own against a thousand Kabyles. It was entirely cut off in the last insurrection, to be sure, by a night surprise: almost every man, woman, and child in the place exterminated. Our proposed hostess herself only escaped with her life by walking across the snow for miles in her nightdress and *peignoir*. The insurgents killed all the inhabitants first, to make quite sure of them, and afterwards hacked them into very small pieces for their own amusement. But that’s a mere trifle; since then, I’m told, the fort has been strengthened, and it’s now partially brick-built, and capable of standing some days’ siege. So that at St. Cloud we shall, doubtless, be comparatively safe. Even if there’s a rising, as there’s very likely to be,’ Uncle Tom repeated, playing his trump card once more for emphasis, ‘it could hold its own against a thousand Kabyles.’

This telling little speech Uncle Tom delivered with considerable nonchalance, directing it straight, with no small cleverness, at his pretty niece’s timid head; and for a moment, indeed, Iris wavered visibly. Her face blanched and her lips quivered faintly at the casual detail of the hacking in pieces. Then that strong and obstinate Knyvett idiosyncrasy of hers came to her aid once more.

‘Very well, uncle dear,’ she said quietly, without pretending in any way to notice his frequent hints of serious danger. ‘I’ll write to this lady this very afternoon, and ask her if she can tell us where to put up if we go to St. Cloud: for that, I suppose, is the only way I can broach the subject. But, Uncle Tom, there’s a dear, whatever you do, don’t mention the question of the rising to mother.’

CHAPTER XXI.

A STRANGE MEETING.

A FEW days later, by the tent door at Beni-Merzoug village, Meriem sat conversing eagerly on the ground with Eustace Le Marchant.

'Well, I've read all the novels now, Eustace,' she said with a smile of profound satisfaction, 'and I've learnt from them, oh! ever such a lot about England. I do like novels. I don't know how I ever got on without them. They are so full of queer facts; they tell one about a life so different from our own; by talking so much with Vernon and you, I think I'm beginning at last a little to realize it. But I want more books to read now: our Kabyle proverb says, "The kid only gives you an appetite for the goat"—and Vernon's got no more to give me.'

'Why not try this?' Eustace suggested with a smile, laying his hand on the painter's 'Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics.'

'No; not that,' Meriem answered, without the faintest embarrassment. 'I like those better when Vernon reads them to me. He makes them sound so much nicer than I can.'

'How about mine, then?' Eustace went on, crestfallen.

'I was looking over yours in the tent yesterday, but I don't think I could understand them much. I took down this: "The Prodrum to the Entomology of North Africa"'—she'd got the long words quite pat now—'but it's so full of queer names I don't understand, and it's not very easy, and it isn't so interesting as "A Princess of Thule." I like "A Princess of Thule" best of all, I think, and after that "The Rise of Silas Lapham." But there's one of your books I believe I could understand—one all about the "Conversation of Energy."'

'Conservation, Meriem,' Le Marchant corrected, laughing. 'My dear child, your education's really going on a great deal too fast if you think of tackling Balfour Stewart already.'

'But I want to learn all I can,' Meriem answered earnestly, 'in case—in case I should ever—be taken—to England.'

‘Meriem,’ Le Marchant said, with a very grave voice, ‘Vernon will never, never take you.’

‘Then why does he talk to me so beautifully, and read me such verses, and paint me so often?’ Meriem answered, with tears rising quick to her big brown eyes. ‘I think, Eustace, he really likes me. And, perhaps, if only I could make myself fit for him——’

‘Meriem!’ the painter cried, at that critical moment, putting in his head at the flap of the tent, ‘I want you out here again, at once. I’ve just got an idea for a most charming picture.’

Meriem brushed away a tear with the corner of her haik, unperceived, as she thought (though Eustace marked it), and went out, smiling, to the too-seductive Vernon.

‘Look here,’ the painter said, over-trustful now of his own powers, ‘I’ve been sketching those girls laying out their clothes on the bank to dry, and I want you to stand in the foreground here and let me fill you in, wringing out a haik, as my central figure.’

Meriem knew no law but Vernon Blake’s will. ‘Very well, Vernon,’ she answered meekly, and posed herself as he wished her, in a simple and natural attitude, like a Greek statue.

‘Why do you always paint *me* so much, and not the other girls?’ she asked, after a pause, as he went on with his sketching.

‘Why, your cousin Iris will be coming soon,’ Blake answered in explanation, altering slightly, with irreverent hands, the pose of one shapely arm and shoulder. ‘You’re by far the prettiest girl in the place, and I want to make hay while the sun shines—to make the best of my opportunities before the great lady comes and takes my beautiful model away for ever.’

‘I’d rather stop here,’ Meriem murmured slowly. She took his admiration, without surprise and without false shame, as a natural tribute.

‘But she won’t let you,’ Blake answered with a laugh; ‘she’ll carry you off bodily, and send you to college, like herself, at Cambridge.’

‘I should like that,’ Meriem said, brightening up; ‘for then I should be——like any Englishwoman’

‘I wonder if you’ll like her,’ Blake observed carelessly. ‘She’ll be an awful swell, I expect; six or seven thousand a year, at least, so Le Marchant tells me.’

‘Will she be dressed like Madame l’Administratrice, do you think?’ Meriem asked, with a sigh. ‘High-heeled boots and a tall hat? For, if she is, I don’t fancy I shall care for her.’

‘She will, no doubt,’ Blake answered, going on with his sketch; ‘the mirror of fashion and the cream of society. And she won’t say a sentence about anything on earth that either you or I can understand a word of.’

As he spoke, the silence of the mountain-side was suddenly disturbed by a loud British voice exclaiming in mingled French and English: ‘Well, *nous voilà* at last, madame; *c’est ici Beni-Merzoug*; and a jolly break-neck ride up these beastly hills we’ve had for it, too, haven’t we, Iris?’

Meriem looked up, and beheld before her eyes a strange and till that moment unheard-of apparition. Two European ladies in riding-habits and hats sat patting the smooth necks of their weary horses; while behind them, on a short, stout mountain pony, a short, stout gentleman, with a very red face, mopped his hot, moist brow with a large and still redder silk pocket-handkerchief. One of the ladies Meriem recognised at once as Madame l’Administratrice; the other she had never seen before, but she knew, of course, from the old gentleman’s words, it was her cousin Iris.

‘Now, my child,’ the stout gentleman remarked, disembarking with some difficulty from his precarious saddle—for he was no cavalier—‘don’t you come into the tent at all. Madame and I will see this man Le Marchant by ourselves at first, and find out how much he wants to get out of us.’

Meriem would have answered, proudly and angrily, at once, so much did the unexpected imputation sting her; but Vernon Blake, anxious to see this little comedy played out in full to its natural close, and foreseeing sport, held one warning finger up to his lip, and Meriem forthwith stood mute as a statue.

So Uncle Tom and madame disappeared into the tent, and Iris, leaping lightly from her graceful Arab, which half

a dozen Kabyle boys from the village, expectant of *sous*, volunteered with many salaams to hold for her, walked frankly up, with her habit in one hand and her whip in the other, to the embarrassed painter.

'We must introduce ourselves, I suppose,' she said, with a sunny and delicious smile. 'My name, as I suppose you will already have guessed, is Iris Knyvett; and you, no doubt, are one of Mr. Le Marchant's camping companions?'

'Your name,' the painter answered, with a half-frightened bow, 'all the world knows, even here in Kabylie. The very last thing I read in print, before leaving Algiers, was the leader in the *Times* on your achievement at Girton.'

Meriem, posed opposite them in her attitude as model, could not fail to notice, with quick, womanly instinct, how far more deferential and courteous was his manner to the grand English lady than it had ever been to her poor Kabyle cousin.

'I'm afraid you have still the advantage of me,' Iris said, with a glance at his beautiful sketch; 'for you haven't yet given me your half of the introduction.'

'My name, I fear, won't convey so much meaning to you,' Blake replied modestly, 'as yours to me. It's Vernon Blake—by trade a painter.'

'You mistake!' Iris cried, with pleased surprise. 'I know your work well. I've seen it at the galleries. You painted that beautiful little study of an Italian child in last year's Grosvenor.'

To Meriem, who knew nothing of all these things, this talk was indeed gall and wormwood. It was cruel of Vernon to put her to such pain; but he had held up his finger to her, and, obedient to that sign, she still kept silence.

The painter's cheek flushed with pleasure. 'I'm glad you liked it,' he said, 'and flattered that you remember it. This, too, will make a pretty little sketch. It's natural, isn't it?'

'It is. And your model's beautiful,' Iris cried enthusiastically. 'What a charming figure! She reminds one of Nausicaa.'

'Eh . . . quite so,' the painter responded, dropping his voice suddenly, with a dubious tone.

There was a moment's pause, during which curiosity and

the natural desire to conceal his ignorance fought hard for mastery in Vernon Blake's mind: then he ventured at last to inquire with caution, 'Er . . . who did you say my model reminded you of?'

'Nausicaa,' Iris repeated in an 'of course so' sort of tone. 'You must know Nausicaa, I'm sure; in the "Odyssey," you remember.'

'I've never read the "Odyssey,"' the painter said shortly.

'Ah, you took up the "Iliad" instead, I suppose,' Iris went on with gentle persistence. Blake allowed the rash conjecture to pass in silence unquestioned. That anyone should have read no Homer at all seemed to her inconceivable. She knew more than her companion: so much was clear—and Meriem hated her for it.

'How extremely fair she is!' Iris continued, observing the trembling Kabyle girl with critical eyes. 'I'd no idea there were people in Africa anything like as European-looking and Greek as she is. Genseric and his Vandals must have left a great deal of their blood, no doubt, stamped deep on the soil in Mauritania generally.'

'No doubt,' Vernon Blake assented, with caution above his years; though who the dickens Genseric might be, or what the Vandals were doing in Mauritania, whatever that was, he had no more notion than Meriem herself had.

'Her eyes are exquisite. You're lucky to get such a model as that,' Iris went on, unconcerned. 'But her feet are perhaps just a trifle——'

Meriem's honest nature could stand it no longer.

'Vernon,' she cried aloud, in an agony of blushes, disregarding the beck of his commanding finger, 'it isn't right, you know; it isn't true to her; you shouldn't let her go on supposing in this way I don't understand English. She might say something she didn't intend me to hear, you know, Vernon.'

Iris drew back, thunderstruck, in a vague tumult of surprise. She recognised in a moment, of course, who the Kabyle girl was that could thus easily and idiomatically address the painter in his native English. But the shock was none the less instantaneous and electric. Never till that morning had it for one instant occurred to her that Uncle Clarence's daughter would not be dressed like an

ordinary Christian—simply and even coarsely or poorly indeed, but still in the common and recognised garb of female Christendom. That this barefooted Kabyle girl, in haik and girdle, with her flowing hair and her Phrygian cap, was the cousin she had come so far to find, fairly took her breath away on the first blush of it.

For a minute they stood at gaze on one another from a safe distance—Iris with the curiosity of a stray visitor to the Zoo; Meriem with the terrified and startled look of a beautiful wild animal brought suddenly to bay. Then Iris slowly moved forward to greet her.

‘You are my cousin Meriem!’ she cried, with a flushed, hot face; and, even as she spoke, she took the beautiful girl’s two hands in her own. Next instant, yielding to a sudden gracious impulse—for blood, after all, is thicker than water—she folded poor trembling Meriem to her bosom, and kissed her on both cheeks with impulsive affection.

In a second, Meriem’s heart had burst with delight at the grand English lady’s goodness and condescension. Those simply chosen words, ‘my cousin Meriem’—that one touch of nature that makes the whole world kin, as she folded her to her bosom—had conquered at once the proud Kabyle reserve in Meriem’s nature. With a fierce flood of tears, the graceful wild thing cast herself passionately at Iris’s feet, and, raising the hem of her riding-habit in her hand, kissed it fervently with her lips a dozen times over.

‘Iris, Iris,’ she cried, ‘I love you! I love you! You might kill me now. I should love you for ever.’

Iris raised her from the ground, with a startled face, half terrified at this unexpected outburst of feminine emotion.

‘Meriem!’ she exclaimed, ‘my dear child, dear Meriem; you mustn’t throw yourself at my feet like that, for worlds! We’re cousins, you know. I’ve come all the way from England to meet you and know you.’ And she clasped the poor girl once more—with more genuine and unaffected tenderness this time—to her own soft bosom.

‘You may go back again, then, if you’ll take me with you,’ Meriem cried impulsively; ‘for now that I’ve seen you, and know what you’re like, I could never take from you one penny of your money. I never wanted it at all myself. All I want is to be near you, and love you.’

At that moment, as they stood there with arms clasped tight round one another silently, before the open heaven, Madame l'Administratrice appeared unexpectedly at the tent-door. The incredible sight made her start with alarm.

'Mon Dieu!' she screamed out volubly, in her shrill little voice, to Uncle Tom within. 'M. Vitmarsh, M. Vitmarsh, come quick and see. *C'est incroyable, mais c'est vrai. Voilà mademoiselle votre nièce qui embrasse une indigène!*'

CHAPTER XXII.

A THUNDERBOLT.

THINGS had gone badly for poor Uncle Tom. He had stepped unawares into the lion's mouth. When the astute old lawyer saw that disconcerting sight from the door of Eustace Le Marchant's tent, he felt that chance had indeed dealt roughly with him.

He took it all in at a glance, of course: so this was the young woman! The Claimant! The Impostor! While he had been talking with the enemy, Le Marchant, in the gate, the young woman herself, losing no time in prosecuting her vigorous assault, had surprised the citadel, and carried it by storm. Nay, what was worse, she had even enlisted that ill-regulated and susceptible Knyvett heart of Iris's on her own side. There he found them, hugging like a pair of fools—plaintiff and defendant in the self-same cause, as thick as thieves one with the other. The foe had suborned a traitor in the camp. This wily Kabyle girl—pretty, no doubt, undeniably pretty; as a man of taste, Uncle Tom could not pretend, in his own mind, to burke that patent fact; but a savage for all that—a mere African savage—trusting to her pure cheek and her physical charms, had made an easy prey of his poor trustful Iris. Those Knyvetts, you see, were always so unpractical. No Whitmarsh on earth would ever have acted like that, Uncle Tom felt certain. No, indeed! Quite the contrary. A Whitmarsh would have held the alleged daughter of the late Uncle Clarence at arm's length securely, and refused to acknowledge off-hand this shadowy claim to an uncertain con-

sanguinity. A Whitmarsh would have fought the matter out, inch by inch, to the bitter end, insisting upon proof at every step, and refusing to accept a single weak fact, a single shaky or illogical inference. While these Knyvetts, you know—bah! it made the eminent Q.C. sick to think of it: so Quixotic; so sentimental; so ignorant of the wiles that were simple matters of everyday experience to an old hand in the Probate and Divorce Division.

If only she had been black, or even dusky, now, as Uncle Tom had always anticipated! But a pucker white woman—as white as himself—and handsome into the bargain! Was ever Q.C. more disastrously fitted with a susceptible client and a dangerous opponent?

It was with difficulty that the disheartened old lawyer finished that evil day's work; but since chance had so brought things about that the first investigation meeting, so to speak, must needs be held before a committee of the whole house, he decided to make a virtue of necessity, and invite Iris and the Claimant herself—to Uncle Tom Meriem was, henceforth, simply the Claimant—to take part openly in their deliberations.

'Iris, my dear,' he called out, in a somewhat testy tone, 'come into the tent here, and bring that—that young person with you.'

'Come along, Meriem,' Iris said, as one speaks to an old friend, leading the timid Kabyle girl by the hand, like a child, to the tent-door. 'Uncle, dear,' she whispered gently into his ear, 'she speaks English, and she's a sensitive creature. Now, for my sake, there's a darling, don't be hard on her, or harsh to her.'

Pretty; and sensitive! Oh, Lord, what luck! He must hold his tongue, it seemed, in presence of the impostor, for fear the truth should hurt her delicate feelings!

'You've got an uncle, young woman,' Uncle Tom observed, with a severe look, fixing a jury-box eye sternly on Meriem. 'I think it would be better that this uncle should be represented, personally or by counsel, if I may be allowed the expression, at this preliminary investigation.'

'What does he say, Iris?' Meriem whispered, awestruck.

'Don't be afraid of him, dear,' Iris whispered in return, clasping Meriem's hand tight in her own, 'He's a little

rough, you know, but he's awfully kind and good, for all that. He only wants you to send for your uncle.'

'I didn't know Englishmen ever talked like that,' Meriem answered simply. 'Vernon and Eustace never speak to me that way.'

Meanwhile Uncle Tom had murmured something in French to Madame l'Administratrice, which Meriem didn't understand. The flippant little Frenchwoman nodded acquiescence.

'*Va chercher l'Amine !*' she cried, in an authoritative voice to Meriem.

The girl caught the meaning, though not the words, and disengaging her hand gently from her cousin's, rose up and glided at once from the tent, 'like a Greek goddess,' Iris thought to herself, as she followed her with attentive eyes, admiringly.

'Yes, a very fine walk,' the painter put in, interpreting her thoughts; for he, too, had joined the party in the tent. 'You see, these girls are so free in their movements, and accustomed to carry such heavy weights on their heads from early childhood, that they grow at last to step evenly poised, like Queen Mab or Titania.'

The English allusions sounded strange to Iris; she herself would have said, in a similar case, 'Like Athene or an Cread.'

In two or three minutes Meriem returned, preceded by the Amine, quite *endimanché*, in a better bernouse than Le Marchant or Blake had yet seen him in.

'*Assieds-toi là !*' Madame l'Administratrice exclaimed in an imperious voice, pointing with her sharp forefinger to a low box-seat in the furthest corner.

Iris was surprised at the haughty *tutoiement*, especially as the Amine, in his best Friday clothes, seemed altogether so much more dignified and important a personage, with his tall, supple body and his Oriental gravity, than the skimpy and volatile little high-heeled Frenchwoman.

The Amine's eyes flashed fire angrily, but he restrained his indignation after the Oriental wont; and with a polite bow and a '*Bonjour, mesdames ; bonjour, messieurs,*' took his seat in the corner where superior authority had so cavalierly relegated him. The melancholy and pathetic Kabyle ex-

pression in his large sunken eyes made Iris feel an instinctive respect and sympathy towards the grave old man.

‘Ask him first, madame,’ Uncle Tom said officially, in such French as he could command—it was perfectly fluent and profoundly insular—‘if he can tell us the precise date of death of this man Yusuf, alias Leboutillier.’

The tears rose quickly into Meriem’s eyes at hearing those most sacred of all names to her so roughly pronounced, but she, too, bit her lips to still her emotion, and, for Iris’s sake, held her peace painfully.

The Frenchwoman repeated the question to the Amine in French, with an inquisitorial air of legal accuracy. But the Kabyle only shook his head in the utmost dismay.

‘*No comprend lingua Franca,*’ he answered helplessly, in the one phrase of that old barbarous jargon which still survived in his native mountains.

‘Ask him in Kabyle, then, madame,’ Uncle Tom persisted.

Madame l’Administratrice started as if she were stung.

‘Do I understand Kabyle, monsieur?’ she exclaimed indignantly, as who should repel a slight upon her personal gentility.

Uncle Tom beamed out at her from his respectable spectacles in mild surprise.

‘Am I to gather, then,’ he said, with wide-open eyes, ‘that you’ve lived for fifteen years on end in Kabylie, and can’t yet speak one word of the Kabyle language?’

‘Not a syllable! not a letter! not a jot! not a tittle!’ madame disclaimed energetically, with a profuse gesture. ‘If these pigs of *indigènes* desire the pleasure of my spirited conversation, let them go and learn French themselves at school, and then they can talk to me.’

‘The loss is certainly theirs,’ Uncle Tom responded, with unwonted gallantry.

‘Meriem can interpret for you, uncle dear,’ Iris suggested coaxingly. ‘Only,’ she whispered somewhat lower in his ear, ‘try to put your questions so as not unnecessarily to hurt the poor child’s feelings.’

This was really too much for Uncle Tom’s equanimity.

‘My dear,’ he whispered back, with legal firmness, ‘such a proceeding would be highly irregular—highly irregular.’

To make the Claimant herself our interpreter in the case would be to turn ourselves over, bound hand and foot, to any nonsense she may choose to palm off upon us.'

'I think,' Le Marchant interposed, with a quiet smile, 'if you will allow me to try, my slight knowledge of Kabyle will probably suffice to put such a very elementary question as the one you suggest to my friend the Amine here.'

Uncle Tom glared at him with angry eyes, but could not very well say him nay. A conspiracy, of course; a most patent conspiracy! but, after all, they were not on their oaths. In a purely private and informal investigation, irregularities of this sort might perhaps be condoned in his client's interest. They'd be sure to let out some damning fact or admission between them.

Le Marchant put the question to the Amine in a few simple words. The Kabyle shook his head in utter perplexity. A date to an Oriental, an exact date within a stray year or two, is an undreamt-of pitch of historical accuracy.

'It was about three years since,' Meriem said, in English, with tears still standing in her big brown eyes, 'for I remember it was just about the time when we gather the olives.'

Uncle Tom gave a comical look of despair. Was this the kind of evidence as to date, forsooth, to tender to a leader in the Probate and Divorce Division of her Majesty's High Court of Justice?

It was Blake's turn now to interpose with a suggestion.

'I think,' he said, turning over the pages of his sketch-book hastily, 'I have something here that may cast light on the matter.' And hitting on the particular sketch he required as he spoke, he passed the open page over to Uncle Tom with polite carelessness.

Uncle Tom accepted the strange item of proffered evidence under mute protest, and without prejudice. As a matter of principle, he didn't believe in the documentary value of an artist's sketches. They're never sworn to before a Justice of the Peace, as the Act directs. Still, he cast a hurried glance, for form's sake, at the particular drawing thus confidently pointed out to him. It was a rough sketch of the mouth of a cave, overgrown with lichens and maidenhair

ferns; and it bore on its front a bold inscription in plain Roman capitals:

‘CLARENCE KNYVETT,
SUA IPSIUS MANU FECIT:
ANNO HEGIRÆ
MCCLXIV.’

Uncle Tom started, but restrained his surprise.

‘It’s not without merit, viewed as a work of art; but what does it *prove*?’ he asked, half angrily.

‘I don’t know,’ Blake answered, retiring abashed. ‘I’ve really no idea. The same question’s been asked about “Paradise Lost,” I believe, and I could never answer it. I suggest it merely on general grounds, as tending to show Clarence Knyvett may have been alive at least as late as the year 1264 of the Mahommedan era. It’s an inscription that Le Marchant and I found on the face of a rock high up on the slopes of Lalla Khadidja in the Djurjura Mountains. It gave us our first clue, in fact, to the curious problem of Meriem’s parentage.’

‘Those words were the last thing Yusuf ever wrote,’ Meriem murmured, half aloud. ‘He must have written them just before he fell from the rocks, when he was hiding from the French, who wanted to shoot him.’

‘And when was the year 1264, I should like to know?’ Uncle Tom sneered contemptuously. The date had such a remote, mediæval sound about it.

It was an unfortunate observation, from Uncle Tom’s point of view, at least; for even as he spoke, Iris, pulling out her purse, consulted a small pocket-almanac. ‘It began,’ she said, after a short but abstruse mental calculation, ‘on April the 20th, 1883.’

Uncle Tom gave a short, sharp whistle to himself—a whistle that he checked a minute later with a distinct air of being (as a Benchet of Lincoln’s Inn) very much ashamed of himself.

‘This is what comes of sending girls to Cambridge,’ he thought to himself inwardly, in a very bad humour. ‘They’re so proud of being able to calculate a date that they supply arms and ammunition gratis to the camp of the enemy—Let me see that book, Iris,’ he went on aloud, in

no happy tone. 'Year of the Hegira, 1268, commencing April 20th, 1887. H'm, that'll do. Now, don't be precipitate.'

But his warning look and uplifted finger were thrown away upon poor eager Iris, who, profoundly interested in the facts of the case, and anxious only to arrive at the truth, forgot to consider her own rôle in Uncle Tom's little extempore drama.

'Why, uncle,' she cried, with a flash of intuition, 'Uncle Alexander died at Bath—I've got it down here among the memoranda you gave me that day at your office—on April the 4th, 1883; and Clarence Knyvett wrote this inscription not earlier than April the 20th in the same year. Therefore, he must have survived Uncle Alexander, and he, not Sir Arthur, was the real inheritor of the Knyvett property.'

A thunderbolt could not have fallen more heavily on poor Uncle Tom. No turkey-cock that ever strutted a farmyard was half so red in the face as he at that moment. He would have given the world just then if only he could have flung down his brief on the table before him, and remarked sarcastically: 'After what my client has just admitted, my lord, there's nothing now left for me to do but to retire at once from the case, and leave him entirely in the hands of the jury.' But here, unhappily, was a client whose cause he could not throw up, come what might—a client with an impossible and incredible fancy for playing into the hands of her own opponents.

'My dear,' he whispered in her ear, in an agony of shame, disgust, and terror, 'leave it to them to say all that; and don't concern yourself at all with Clarence Knyvett. What we have to do first is to solve the question, When did the man Yusuf die? After that, we have to ask ourselves next, Was Yusuf identical with Joseph Leboutillier? Only in the third place can we come to the question, Were Yusuf and Joseph Leboutillier in turn aliases of your uncle, Clarence Knyvett?'

'Yusuf died accidentally, by a fall from a cliff,' Le Marchant put in, carrying on the problem of the date at issue. 'Surely there would be something like an inquest or *procès verbal* held on his body—some statement of the cause of death in the *actes de l'état civil* at St. Cloud'—and he

turned round with a question in French to Madame l'Administratrice.

'*Est-ce que je sais, moi ?*' the little lady answered, with a screwed-up face and a shrug of her shoulders. 'Do I take note of the death of this, that, or the other *indigène*, think you? *Qu'est-ce que ça me fait, à moi, monsieur ?* My husband can tell you, perhaps. He keeps a register of these events, possibly.'

'My father fell over the cliff,' Meriem put in suddenly after a long and abstruse effort of reason in the endeavour, by the aid of Iris's almanac, to correlate the Christian and Mahommedan calendars, 'some time in November, 1883; I know it now by the date of the Moharram. A man came up from Algiers to search for him——'

'A French detective,' Le Marchant interposed. 'So one of the Fathers at St. Cloud told me.'

'And Yusuf thought that if he remained at Beni-Merzoug, the man would find out his French name, and get them to shoot him,' Meriem went on, with an evident and painful struggle. 'So he went and lived in the caves in the Djurjura, and there he fell over a cliff and died; and that's all I can tell you about it.'

'Why,' Iris exclaimed, with a flushed face, 'that must have been the detective—you remember, Uncle Tom—that Sir Arthur sent up to make inquiries about him. And Uncle Clarence must have mistaken who it was that sent the man, and why they wanted him. And so he must have fled from his own property and his own people at the very time they were trying hardest to discover him.'

Uncle Tom's face was a study to behold. It would have made the fortune of some rising *genre* painter. Such a client as this he had never had to deal with. She would spoil the best case that ever was briefed. She gave up everything at the mere nod of her dangerous opponent.

'My dear,' he said slowly, aloud this time, 'you're making a great many most unwarrantable assumptions. *If* the inscription's really genuine, which we don't know—I give no opinion; it may or it may not be—and *if* Yusuf was the man Leboutillier; and *if* Leboutillier was your uncle Clarence; and *if* we can trust these people's evidence——'

He got no further, for, as he said those words, Meriem rose up like a statue before him.

'Iris,' she cried earnestly, taking her cousin's hand once more in hers, 'I love you! I love you! I'll speak to you; I won't speak to him, because he distrusts me and doesn't believe me. Nobody ever distrusted me before, not even the Kabyles. Don't let him come here any more to inquire. I can't bear to hear him speak like that about my dear dead father. I loved Yusuf, and I love him still. I'm glad you've come. I'm glad you're my cousin. But whether the money you've come about is yours or mine, let's say no more about it. I hope you'll keep it. I want none of it. What good is it to me? All I want is to know my father's friends. And if you'll let me love you, I need no money.'

'Uncle Tom,' Iris said, flushing red in return, 'let her off, there's a dear! She means what she says. You're hurting her affections. If we want to set this matter right at all, we must set it right without bothering Meriem.'

They rose to go, but Meriem clung to her.

'Iris,' she whispered, 'come again soon, and see me alone. I want to talk to you. I want to be friends with you.'

'I'll come again soon, dear,' Iris answered with a kiss. 'I love you, too, Meriem. I think I understand you.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

A DIFFICULT CLIENT.

THEY mounted their horses and rode back towards St. Cloud in moody silence. Madame l'Administratrice indeed, to do her justice, chatted volubly and flippantly all the way. But Uncle Tom and Iris, in no mood for gossip, contented themselves with an occasional nod or a smile of acquiescence. Their minds, to say the truth, were otherwise engaged than with madame's regrets for her Parisian luxuries. Uncle Tom was in a distinctly bad humour; and with Uncle Tom that always meant that the case was turning out very ill for his client. He couldn't conceal from himself two obvious facts: first, that it looked very much

indeed as though the man Yusuf and Clarence Knyvett were really one and the same person; secondly, that it looked very much indeed as if Clarence Knyvett had really outlived his brother Alexander. If these things were so, two points alone could save his client's case. In the first place, it was pretty certain that Clarence Knyvett could never have married Meriem's mother in any sense recognised by the Probate and Divorce Division. In the second place, it was also pretty certain that no good legal proof was forthcoming of the identity of Yusuf with Joseph Leboutillier. Comforting his soul with which two specious legal quibbles, Uncle Tom directed his mountain pony cautiously homeward in no little internal perturbation.

As for Iris, she rode on with equal regret at many results of this strange interview. At the very first blush of it, her heart had gone forth to her unknown cousin. There was something about Meriem's simple nature that she felt civilization could never rival. She was vexed in soul that Uncle Tom, with his Lincoln's Inn suspiciousness and his Old Bailey wit, should have gone against the grain of that fine natural character. But, furthermore, the practical outcome of that morning's work had strangely discomposed her own plans for the future. Let Uncle Tom and the legal aspect of the case quibble as they might, in simple equity Iris felt sure that Sir Arthur's property belonged, by right, to Meriem only. She didn't doubt now that Meriem was Clarence Knyvett's only daughter, and that Clarence had survived his brother Alexander. Thinking so, her soul, like her Homeric hero's, was divided this way and that within her. For, on the one hand, her strong sense of justice and her clamorous, imperative Knyvett conscience made her anxious to see abstract right done to Meriem, let what might follow. *She* could not fight over legal quibbles, where the truth was clear, or pretend to hesitate about questions of identity when Uncle Clarence's daughter stood visible in the flesh, a true Knyvett, before her. If Meriem was the heiress, provable or not, let Meriem take the goods that belonged to her.

But, on the other hand, Iris felt with a pang it would be hard indeed to give up Sidi Aia. Six thousand a year had moved her little; mere money stated in pounds sterling

means not much to a very young woman. But now that she had seen Sidi Aia, and felt the pride of possession in that exquisite home, it would be hard indeed to give it up to the rightful owner. She wished she had never seen it at all, so as never to know the pain of parting with it.

'I believe in Meriem, Uncle Tom,' she ventured to observe timidly, at last. 'I don't think she wants to get Uncle Arthur's property.'

Uncle Tom's ill-humour grew deeper as he went, the case looking blacker and blacker on reflection.

'The girl's a mere tool,' he answered sullenly. 'She's dupe, not knave. *She* won't do much harm to us. It's that man Le Marchant who's egging her on. It was he who invented this cock-and-bull story. He means to marry her, and prosecute her claim. Exactly what I told you has really happened. He read your advertisement, and saw his chance of setting up a new sort of Tichborne Claimant. Of course it was he who carved that inscription.'

'I never thought of that!' Iris cried with surprise, half clutching at the straw, if only it could save her that beautiful Sidi Aia. 'But the painter said he saw it too, and I somehow fancy the painter's a good young fellow. With a face like that, he could hardly be otherwise. I never saw anybody handsomer or more transparent.'

Uncle Tom grunted.

'You'd learn to distrust your own brother,' he said shortly—'supposing you had one—if you'd practised half as long as I have at the Bar of the Probate and Divorce Division.'

Iris was silent for a few minutes more. Then she said again, 'There's something inexpressibly weird to my mind in the coincidence that one brother should be living in luxury in Algiers—'

'No coincidence in the world at all about it!' her uncle answered testily, with a burst of ill-humour. 'Your logic's bad. That's always the case with you Cambridge graduates. If you'd only been to Oxford, now, like me, you'd see at a glance that the thing's a matter of mere ordinary sequence. Your uncle Clarence came to Algiers as Joseph Leboutillier—so much's admitted on all sides; and it was his coming over here first that entailed in the end all the rest of our coming—Sir Arthur's, and yours, and mine, and your

mother's. Sir Arthur came, like us, to assure himself his brother was comfortably dead and buried; and, not being burdened with a young woman of Cambridge education and fanciful proclivities, *he* was lucky enough to satisfy himself offhand of the fact, which is more than *we* seem likely to do, confound it! He found the climate and the country suited him, so he bought Sidi Aia out of the money of the trust, in accordance with the terms of the Admiral's will; and small blame to him, either; for a prettier or sweeter place I never saw, though you *do* want to fling it at the head of this claimant. Where's the coincidence in all that, I'd like to know? Now, where's your coincidence? A simple ordinary matter of natural cause and effect—that's just what a logical Oxford mind calls it.'

'But how painful to think,' Iris went on reflectively, without heeding his interruption, 'that one brother was living in luxury and splendour at Sidi Aia, while the other brother, the real heir to the property, was skulking for his life in fear and trembling among these snowy mountains, and dependent for his bread upon the charity of the Kabyles!'

'That's just it,' Uncle Tom went on with dogged calmness, crushing down his own doubts the better to crush down and annihilate his niece's. 'That's just what I say. Is it likely? Is it credible? Is it in accordance with all we know of human nature? If he was the heir to this fine estate—for it *is* a fine estate, Iris, though you want to shuffle it off on the bare-legged young woman of doubtful antecedents—would he go hiding and starving in a cave on the mountains, instead of coming down, and saying openly: "Here am I, Clarence Knyvett, the rightful owner, come to claim my own; get out of my house and give me up my money"?''

'You forget,' Iris said, 'that the French would have shot him, and the English sent him into penal servitude.'

'I don't forget it,' Uncle Tom repeated with some asperity. 'I don't forget it. I never forget anything. It's a habit I've acquired in the course of my practice. But do you think anybody in his senses would shoot or imprison the heir to a splendid property like that? No, no, my girl; I know the law in its practical working in all countries.'

Shoot a poor devil of a deserter, if you like, with three sous in his pocket, and nobody 'll bother about it; but not a man who can ask the General of Division to dinner at Sidi Aia, with *pâté de foie gras* and a magnum of Veuve Clicquot.'

Iris was silent. Young as she was, she knew the world well enough already to guess there was probably a good deal of truth in Uncle Tom's cynical contention.

'Well, now, Iris,' Uncle Tom went on, drawing rein for a second as they reached the village, 'I've had enough of your co-operation in this matter, I can tell you. I mean to hunt up the rest of the question myself, with the aid of an interpreter—I suppose there's *somebody* here at St. Cloud who understands this beastly Kabyle lingo—and sorrow another word shall you have to say to it. You may fraternize with the bare-legged young woman of doubtful antecedents as much as you like in private—I've nothing to say against her as far as she goes: she's a well-meaning tool of that man Le Marchant's; but never again shall I let so incompetent a junior as yourself be with me in a case of such prime importance. I've taken away the brief from you, so remember in future I manage this business alone, in my own fashion.'

As they passed out of the street at Beni-Merzoug, Hussein and the marabout had watched them depart from the sacred grove by the little domed tomb of the village saint. 'There goes she of the high heels,' Hussein cried out mockingly, in his own tongue, at the same time that he bowed his head deferentially almost to the ground before her.

'In Allah's good time,' the holy man answered, 'her proud head shall roll in the dust before the face of Allah.'

'And these others who have come to her from over the sea; shall we slay them too?' Hussein asked with languid interest.

'Is it not written, "The Lord knows His own"?' the marabout replied, looking vacantly before him. 'When the Faithful unfurl the flag of a Jihad—a holy war—they respect not persons; they destroy utterly the enemy of Allah himself, and his house, and his slaves, and his servants,

and his friend, and the stranger that is within his gates, leaving not one living soul behind them.'

'The biggest one—her with the fair hair,' Hussein went on regretfully, with a side-glance at Iris; 'it's a pity to kill her. It seems such a waste of good material. She might serve well to draw water and to cook *cous-cous*, and to prepare the house for the sons of the Faithful. Her face is pretty. I like her looks better even than Meriem's.'

'Slay the men; take the women alive, says the word of Allah. All but the woman with the high heels. Lay her low in the dust, says the servant of the All-Powerful.'

Hussein smiled—a horrible, wistful smile. 'That's well,' he said, chuckling. 'I prefer her to Meriem.' And he followed her with a gloating look in his fierce black eyes till she faded out of sight down the long and narrow zigzag mule-path.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HELLENICA.

'Do you know, Eustace,' Blake said at breakfast in the tent next morning, 'I've been devoting myself too exclusively of late to the mere figure. I must really go back to a little more landscape. These studies of mine of girls and young men—Meriem in particular—will be awfully useful to me when I get back to England. I mean to work 'em up, and make really good things of 'em for the Academy, some day. But they require the local landscape for background; they require the landscape. Such essentially idyllic types of life are nothing at all without their natural setting of olive and pine, cactus and fan-palm. "The long brook falling through the cloven ravine," and all that sort of thing's a necessary adjunct. I must go further afield, and keep up my details.'

Le Marchant smiled, for he knew in his own soul, already, what was coming. 'And where will you go?' he asked as innocently as he could.

'Why, over near St. Cloud, I think,' Vernon Blake replied, perusing the canvas ceiling; 'there are some jolly bits there. One dear little shrine in particular, on a tall hillside, all hung about with rags and pilgrims' offerings,

took my fancy immensely the last time we were over there. And that skittish small Frenchwoman told me the other day, when we went to call upon her—for they had made their peace, in the interval, with Madame l'Administratrice—'that if ever I happened to be painting over their way, it would give her and monsieur all the pleasure in the world if I'd drop in at the Fort to have a mouthful of luncheon. It's convenient having a place where one can get a feed, you know.' And he fiddled with his jack-knife, trying to look unconcerned and unconscious.'

'Poor Meriem!' Le Marchant murmured with genuine regret, spreading some more tinned lobster on a large round sea-biscuit.

'Well, I never pretended I really cared for her,' Blake answered in the oblique oration. 'And this other girl, if it comes to that, is a real English lady, and worth ten thousand of her.'

'That's a matter of opinion,' Le Marchant said stoutly.

'She's too learned for me, though,' Blake went on, with some latent chagrin in his tone. 'Do you know what she said about Meriem, yesterday? She observed, quite casual-like, that Genseric and his Vandals—I think the gentleman's name was Genseric—must have left their mark deep on the soil and the people throughout all Mauritania. By Jove! I didn't know which way to look. I never heard of Mr. Genseric in my life before, and I couldn't tell you where Mauritania was, or is, if my neck depended upon it. That's the sort of girl I admire, now, if you like. Genseric and his Vandals, she said, as pat as A B C—Genseric and his Vandals.'

'But, my dear fellow, it's in Gibbon, you know. There's nothing very wonderful in her having read the old familiar "Decline and Fall of the Rooshian Empire."'

'I never read Gibbon,' Blake responded with a stolid face.

'Well, it's in "Murray's Guide," then, if it comes to that,' Le Marchant retorted, without venturing to observe that a woman might have read far more than Blake, and yet by no means set up as a prodigy of learning. 'It seems to me far more surprising, as an intellectual feat, that Meriem, brought up in this out-of-the-way village, should have taught herself to read English, all of her own accord, than

that Miss Knyvett, aided and abetted and egged on from behind by a *posse comitatus* of Girton tutors, should have crammed herself up to be Third Classic.'

'Different men have different opinions,' Blake quoted gaily; 'and, for my part, inions is not my taste. I willingly resign you my share in Meriem. She's all very well for a summer flirtation, I grant you—a man *must* amuse himself—but to compare her for one second to that heavenly apparition sent to be a moment's ornament, in the riding-habit and hat! Why, it makes me positively angry to hear you. She's a phantom of delight, that's what I call her. I'm off, Eustace. I shan't be back till six in the evening.'

He trudged across to St. Cloud on foot; and, being a prudent man, so he flattered himself inwardly, he called before beginning his work at the Fort, just to let Madame l'Administratrice know beforehand that he meant to specialise her general invitation, and drop in to luncheon this particular noonday.

Madame l'Administratrice looked pettishly coquettish.

'While we were all by ourselves, monsieur,' she said, with a fetching little glance towards Iris, 'you never did us the honour of accepting our hospitality.'

Vernon Blake smiled a sheepish smile. He could be bold as brass before poor barefooted Meriem; but the Third Classic, that awesome English heiress, brought out at once all the instinctive shyness of his underlying nature.

'Why, I'm going to paint over here to-day,' he stammered out timidly, in his best Ollendorff; 'and you said, you know, whenever I came over, you'd do me the honour of allowing me to lunch here.'

'Oh, mayn't madame and I come out and watch you?' Iris asked with genuine interest and pleasure. 'But perhaps you don't like being watched. I've never seen a real painter at work in my life, do you know; and after that sweet thing of yours in the Grosvenor last year, I should love to find out exactly how you do it.'

'I shall be only too flattered,' Blake answered, smiling, that being, in fact, the precise object with which he had come over there. Love at first sight was the name of his malady.

'And may I go too?' Mrs. Knyvett inquired, focussing

the prominent feature full upon the painter with a benign smile.

'Oh, not for the world, dear,' Iris interposed earnestly. 'It's so chilly this morning, and the wind's from the mountains, and I should be afraid of my life it'd bring on your bronchitis.'

Blake heard this veto with lively satisfaction. He fancied from the tone it was not perhaps entirely dictated by filial solicitude. Besides, madame didn't know a single word of English, and was, therefore, admirably adapted (from the point of view of giddy youth) for enacting with effect the part of the common or garden gooseberry.

They strolled out together to the point on the hillside where Blake had decided to select his background—a pretty little dell by a Kabyle road; and there the young artist, with those big gray eyes, set up his canvas on the easel, where Meriem, of course, as central figure stood, already painted-in with striking vigour. It was a graceful form, and Iris admired it with genuine admiration.

'How beautifully you paint these people!' she said, looking up at him. 'You seem to have caught their spirit to the very life. Such *naïveté* and simplicity; the Kabyles all over.'

'I'm glad you like it,' Blake answered, blushing. 'Praise from your lips is indeed commendation.'

Iris glanced timidly aside at madame. Half a dozen Kabyle boys had gathered, as was their wont, already round the canvas to see the infidel stranger paint; and the little Frenchwoman, having drawn a semicircular line with her parasol in the dust of the path round the base of the easel, was congenially engaged in rapping with the knobby top of the same weapon of offence the bare toes of any luckless urchin who ventured to transgress her prescribed limit. '*Une occupation comme une autre!*' she said, looking up with a good-humoured and mischievous smile at Iris. '*Il faut bien s'amuser. Et puis ça leur apprend le respect de l'autorité.*'

'Would you like to look at my sketch-book?' Blake said in English, handing it to the amiable chaperon as he spoke. Madame took it, and glanced over it carelessly. It was not in the least Parisian; nothing piquant at all in it; so she

passed it on with a yawn and a sigh to Iris. Ten minutes later she was beginning to *s'ennuyer*, to prevent which misfortune she buried her face in close communion with a paper-covered copy of Daudet's 'Sapho,' imported by post from Algiers yesterday.

So Iris and Blake, left to themselves, talked on for an hour uninterrupted. By that time madame, propped against a tree, had fallen asleep quietly over her Parisian story.

'How do you like it now?' Blake asked at last, standing off a foot or two, and surveying his own handicraft with not ungraceful complacency.

'It's just like a little idyl from Theocritus, Mr. Blake,' Iris cried admiringly. 'Doesn't your work often remind you while you're painting of Theocritus? It seems to me absolutely inspired in every detail by the true old *naïve* Dorian feeling.'

'I haven't read Theocritus,' Blake answered modestly, feeling bound to disclaim the honour thus thrust upon him. 'To tell you the truth, I don't read Latin at all, Miss Knyvett.'

'Oh, don't you?' Iris cried with a faint little blush of sympathetic shame at his simple blunder. 'I'm sorry for that, for then you've never had the pleasure of reading the "Georgics"; and the "Georgics" to you would be like flowers to the bees—your native field, your predestined pabulum. You'd revel in the "Georgics," I'm quite sure, Mr. Blake, if you read Latin. And you don't read Greek, then, either, of course; for whoever reads Homer has first read Virgil. That's a pity, too, for you'd delight in Theocritus. The scent of these thymy southern hillsides blows through every line of his breezy idyls, as whiffs of the heather blow through Wordsworth's "Excursion," and the perfume of the may through some of Tennyson's English country pieces.'

'So Theocritus wrote in Greek, did he?' Blake answered, ill at ease, ruthlessly exposing his own hasty mistake, which Iris had endeavoured so gracefully to gloss over and yet prevent for the future. 'Then I made a stupid ignorant blunder when I thought he was a Latin. Miss Knyvett,' and he paused with his brush upturned, 'you're a sight too clever for me to talk to.'

‘Not clever,’ Iris corrected; ‘only well read. I’ve mugged it up out of books, that’s all. Anybody can mug it all up if he’ll only take the pains. I had to at Cambridge.’

‘But what was that you said yesterday about Nausicaa?’ Blake went on, still blushing. ‘I wanted to ask you who Nausicaa was; and just then I was really afraid and ashamed to.’

‘Oh, Nausicaa?’ Iris answered with a little laugh. ‘She’s in the “Odyssey,” you know; the daughter of Alcinous, King of Phæacia, and she goes with her maidens to wash linen by the seashore; and there she finds Odysseus thrown upon the coast; and then’—gliding gently over the dangerous ground with a faint blush, for even a Girton girl is still a woman—‘she gives him dry things and takes him home in her father’s chariot to the Court of Phæacia.’

‘It sounds like good ballad poetry,’ Blake answered interested. ‘Worked up in the style of the “Earthly Paradise,” I should think it ought to make very graceful verse.’

‘I wish I were going to stop here longer,’ Iris said quite seriously, amused at his inverted way of looking at Homer, ‘and I’d teach you Greek. It’s a grand language . . . and I can’t bear to think you’ve never heard the bees hum in Theocritus.’

‘You’d find me a precious bad pupil, I’m afraid,’ Blake went on with a sigh, as he added a still deeper tinge of orange to the throat of the great Cretan mullein he was daintily painting. ‘I was always bad at anything like a language.’

Iris paused, admiring the exquisite depth of the colour in the gorge of the bell, and the masterly painting of the whole imperial blossom. Remembering the scraps of Ollendorffian French she had already heard him stumble through with Madame l’Administratrice, she began to fear vaguely in her own soul that her new hero had by no means unduly underestimated his own very slender linguistic capabilities. She gazed at the canvas, and tried another tack.

‘After all,’ she said, with pensive head on one side appreciative, ‘why should I wish you to read Theocritus at all, when I see you *are* in all essentials a Theocritus already? What the Greek tried to say with words and rhythm, that

you say for us here in visible images with form and pigment. The same grace, the same studied ease, the same southern rusticity, the same simple naturalness. Nothing about your art is anywhere affected.' Her own thoughts hurried her on too far. '*You* have no need to go to school to the Greeks,' she went on. 'You, a poet-painter, have in yourself, to start with, those very ideas which we ordinary mortals strive to hammer into our heads by hard practice through daily acquaintance with the masterpieces of literature.'

Blake looked back at her with his big eyes full of childish wonder. He hardly knew how to contain himself with surprise. Delicate flattery is dear to the soul of every one of us; sympathy, appreciation, encouragement in our art—though we don't often get them; but that *she*, the one woman whom he most dreaded and admired on earth, whom he had lain awake to dream of all last night, should thus condescend to put him, as it were, upon her own level, and to balance his gifts with hers, not wholly to his disadvantage—this, indeed, was more than he could have hoped or prayed for. And the best of it was, in a shamefaced way, in that back-corner of self-esteem which even the most modest of us keeps somewhere perdu at the far-end of his brain, he recognised himself with an inward blush that all she said had a great deal of truth in it. He *was* a poetic painter by nature, and he felt instinctively the underlying kinship between work like his own and the best pastoral poetry. But Le Marchant had never told him that. Le Marchant had never casually remarked upon his brotherhood with the great idyllic poets. No one but she, that incomparable she, in her noble condescension, had ever yet beheld the whole genius that was in him.

'You're very kind,' he said, one blush pervading him to the roots of his hair. 'You somehow make me feel quite at home at once with you. Shall I confess now why I thought Theocritus wrote in Latin? I think I will. Because I know him only through Andrew Lang's ballade, "Where breaks the blue Sicilian sea"—you remember? And Sicilians, I fancied, must surely have spoken Latin, because nowadays, I suppose, they speak Italian.'

'I never read that piece,' Iris answered unabashed.

'Oh, let me repeat it then,' Blake cried, enchanted to find he knew something she didn't. Young love delights to drop into poetry; and he recited it all through with a sonorous voice to his listening companion.

Iris followed the flow of those dainty lines with deep attention. 'It's beautiful,' she said as he finished; 'simple and beautiful, like your own painting.'

They paused awhile; then Iris said once more, to change the subject: 'How hot it is here! I'm quite thirsty. I should love some lemonade. My kingdom for a lemon!'

Blake dropped into poetry once again. The mood was on him:

"Oh, for a draught of vintage that has been
Cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth;
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song and sun-burnt mirth;
Oh, for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene!"'

'That's pretty, too,' Iris said, admiring. 'And is that Andrew Lang also? Please tell it all to me.'

Blake started in surprise. 'What, not know that!' he cried. 'Why, it's Keats, of course; the Ode to the Nightingale. I thought, of course, you'd have read *that*. It's a lovely thing. You must let me repeat it to you.'

Iris blushed again. 'You'll think me dreadfully ignorant, I'm afraid,' she said apologetically. 'I've had to work so hard at Greek and Latin the last few years, that I'm afraid I've rather neglected the English poets; while your mind seems to be just saturated with them. I wish I'd read them as much as you have.'

Young love is always frankly self-conscious. 'How quickly a woman finds out all that's in one!' he cried, delighted; 'so much faster than a man. I've lived with Le Marchant six months in a tent, and yet, except for a certain manual deftness in painting pictures, I don't believe he's ever found out there's anything in me.'

Iris dropped her pretty eyelashes with a demure droop—for all the world like any ordinary girl who has *not* been to Cambridge.

'Mr. Le Marchant's a mere man of science,' she said

slowly. 'Perhaps . . . you and I . . . have more in common.'

Vernon Blake tramped back to the tent that night, up the steep path, with that painful malady strong upon him. It made his heart go thump, thump, thump. And as he tramped, he said to himself a hundred times over in an ecstasy of delight, 'Here, by God's grace, is the one maid for me,' as Geraint said when he first saw Enid.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CLAIMANT'S CASE COLLAPSES.

FOR the next fortnight, Vernon Blake's single-hearted devotion to landscape was really nothing short of exemplary. The figure, at least as a subject for artistic study, seemed suddenly to have lost for him all interest or attraction. He tramped it over to St. Cloud every morning regularly, across that weary pass, and painted away at the background of his big picture with a steadiness of aim and forgetfulness of fatigue that would have deserved the highest commendation—in an older man. Almost every morning, too, by some strange coincidence, Iris somehow happened to be passing casually, and to look, for a few minutes at least as she passed, at the progress of the handsome young painter's work.

One would almost have fancied they both did it on purpose, were such suspicions possible about a Third Classic. But Girton girls, of course, like Cæsar's wife, are above suspicion.

'Don't you think, perhaps, he's a trifle dangerous, Tom?' Mrs. Knyvett asked more than once of her astute brother.

And the eminent Q.C., who flattered himself he had a keen nose for the trail of a fortune-hunter, answered off-hand, 'No, no, Amelia; not he. He's an innocent, ignorant young man, the painter. Not at all the sort of person ever likely to fall in love with a girl like Iris; and certainly not at all the sort of person a girl like Iris is ever the least likely to fall in love with. He doesn't know a quarter enough for *her*, bless you! It's that clever Le Marchant fellow that we've got to steer clear of.'

In which confident prediction Uncle Tom was so fully justified by the facts of the case that before the first fortnight was well over Iris caught herself looking out with a beating heart every morning from her windows in the Fort, to see if the painter, with his easel on his back, was trudging down the hill; and Vernon Blake on his side caught himself, with a similar flutter under his waistcoat watch-pocket, waiting for the slightest rustle of a certain dainty morning-dress against the lentisk bushes of the hedge, as he stood and painted with trembling fingers at that interminable background.

Iris saw a great deal all these days of Meriem also; for Uncle Tom had now procured the philological services of a one-eyed Maltese—official interpreter to the Commune of St. Cloud—of whose aid in speaking the Kabyle tongue he availed himself freely in his legal inquiries; and though Iris herself was henceforth strictly excluded from these severe interviews as a dangerous personage to her own cause, she generally rode across with her uncle to the Beni-Merzoug mountain, and sat among the bare rocks outside, chatting with Meriem, while the great Q.C., the Amine, and the Kabyles generally, were endeavouring to arrive, by question and answer, through the medium of the one-eyed Maltese's English, at some possible mode of understanding one another's respective ideas, Oriental or Western.

On one such occasion Uncle Tom came over in high glee, primed for the final inquiry of all, to which his careful research among the archives of St. Cloud had now ultimately narrowed itself. He had no doubt by this time in his own mind that a good deal of the Claimant's story was true—that Clarence Knyvett, after enlisting at Toulon as Joseph Leboutillier, had really run away from the Third Chasseurs, out of pique or Quixotism, and taken refuge among the Kabyles under the name of Yusuf. He had discovered further, from the *Actes de l'Etat Civil* at St. Cloud, that the fugitive had survived his brother Alexander by several months, and therefore, in accordance with the blundering terms of the old Admiral's will, possessed the power of bequeathing the family property to whomever he chose, provided only he died in the position of a father to lawful issue, by English usage recognised as such, and then only.

Hence, the one point Uncle Tom had still to investigate was the very simple one whether Clarence Knyvett's marriage with Halima, Meriem's mother, was in the eyes of the Probate and Divorce Division a true wedlock or a purely polygamous and non-Christian union. And that he could prove this sole remaining point to his own satisfaction he had very little doubt indeed. The proof, to be sure, would not satisfy Iris's extreme views as to Aristotelian equity; but it would amply satisfy the scruples of an English judge; and that was quite enough for Uncle Tom. The great Blackstone had pronounced the union a meretricious one. Uncle Tom didn't for a moment doubt that Iris herself could be persuaded in the end to agree with the great Blackstone on the legal issue, to compromise Meriem's shadowy claims for some small annuity, and to enjoy her own good and undoubted title to the estate without further dreams of a Quixotic and unpractical natural justice.

On this particular morning, therefore, Uncle Tom sat under the open corridor of the Amine's cottage, endeavouring for the tenth time at least to cross-examine, in his familiar Chancery Lane style, these very unpromising and incomprehensible witnesses.

It was hard, indeed, to drag anything out of them; their Oriental imagery clouded from the eminent Q.C.'s Occidental mind their underlying meaning. But at last Uncle Tom had begun to discover a right mode of approach, and to pin the Amine down, step by step, to something like a consistent statement of plain history.

'Ask him,' Uncle Tom remarked to the interpreter, with severe emphasis, 'whether he was present himself on the particular occasion when his sister Halima, or whatever else her outlandish name may be, was married to the man they called Yusuf.'

'He says, of course he was,' the one-eyed Maltese responded cheerfully, as the Amine, with innumerable nods and gestures, expressed his assent volubly in many guttural notes to the question proposed to him.

'Ask him once more,' Uncle Tom continued, with an austere countenance, 'if there was any written contract of marriage.'

'He says, Allah is great, and it is not the custom with the

sons of the Kabyles,' the interpreter replied, again translating, with his one eye fixed firmly on the barrister's face.

'Then what was the ceremony performed at the wedding?' Uncle Tom went on, with malicious joy.

'He says, the All-Merciful was pleased to prosper him; he got twenty francs and a French Government rifle for her,' the interpreter replied, with his gravest expression.

Uncle Tom was delighted, though he feigned surprise, and with difficulty repressed a triumphant smile. Nothing could be more beautifully barbaric than this. Twenty francs and a Government rifle! If ever the case should come into an English Court, which wasn't likely, the learned judge, Uncle Tom felt certain, would dismiss Miss Meriem at once, with costs, on the mere strength of that one feeble and fatuous admission.

'But the ceremony!' Uncle Tom objected, with a severe face, trying to look shocked. 'The religious sanction? The obligation or bond? The *nexus matrimonii*? They must surely have something among these rude tribes in the nature of a wedding. They don't manage the matter as the fowls of the air would, do they, surely?'

'He says, a man who knows how to read Arabic recites the first and fourth chapters of the Koran,' the interpreter replied, 'and then the husband pays the contract price, and they eat a dish of *cous-cous* together, and the parties thenceforth are considered married.'

Uncle Tom rubbed his hands together gaily. '*Confarreatio*!' he murmured to himself. 'Heathen *confarreatio*, not Christian marriage.—And that was all that took place in this case?' he asked aloud, with considerable unceasing.

'Oh no,' the interpreter replied, after consulting his principal; 'there was more than that, the Amine remarks; much feasting and dancing took place in the house, and quantities of figs and of *cous-cous* were eaten.'

'But there was no sort of wedding or marriage ceremony before the French authorities?' Uncle Tom insisted; 'no going before the priest or the Maire, for example, or anybody of that sort?'

'The Amine says, do you take him for a dog?' the interpreter answered, with an unmoved face. 'Was his sister a Christian, that she should do these things? Have not all

his people been reckoned among the stanchest of the Faithful since the beginning of time, and is not he himself lineally descended from the Glory of Islam, the Star of the Atlas, the holy saint Sidi Mohammed of the Djurjura?

Uncle Tom was almost satisfied now, but he thought it well to ask just one more question before he considered the point as finally settled.

'Ask the man,' he said once more, with his suavest voice, to make security doubly sure, 'whether polygamy is lawful among his countrymen, the Kabyles.'

'The Amine replies, unhappily his people are too poor to be able to afford more than one wife apiece,' the interpreter answered. 'The Arabs, who are richer, have often more. Herds of camels and many wives are theirs. But the law of the Prophet is alike for all. There is but one Koran for Arab or Kabyle. Let not the Faithful set themselves up against the customs of Islam. In common with all other true Moslems, the Kabyles may have four wives apiece, if they choose, after the example of the ever-blessed Prophet Mohammed, and the glorious and victorious Caliph Omar.'

Uncle Tom chuckled audibly to himself at the naïve reply. The learned judge would know very well how to deal with a so-called marriage of *that* sort. A polygamous union, of no legal value! The case was practically closed now. The Claimant was *not* Clarence Knyvett's lawful heir, according to the requirements of English law. Uncle Tom had vindicated the sanctity of Christian wedlock. He had confounded the wiles of that artful Le Marchant. He felt his bosom swell with an honest pride. Twenty francs and a Government rifle, indeed! The Claimant's case had collapsed utterly.

CHAPTER XXVI.

TWO MAIDENS.

OUTSIDE, meanwhile, upon the rocks under the gnarled old olives on the slope, Meriem and Iris sat and talked hard by, like two sisters who had lived with one another for a whole lifetime. Bare-footed, one, and a Girton girl, the other, that fortnight had brought them very close together. It seemed

to Meriem as if for the first time in all her life she had found a girl friend to whom she could confide what was innermost and most profoundly sacred within her.

'I suppose, Iris,' she said, in her simple, childlike way, peeping out from her robe with half-coquettish shyness, 'the English part of me has only just begun quite lately to awaken. Before Vernon and Eustace came here to camp, I had never seen any English people at all, you see, except only Yusuf.'

'Uncle Clarence, you mean,' Iris suggested, half starting.

'He was Yusuf to me while he lived,' Meriem answered, with a grave and serious look, taking her new friend's hand in her own, as was her wont; 'and he shall be Yusuf to me always as long as I live, whatever his English people may have called him. Well, you see, dear, till Vernon and Eustace came to camp here, I hardly remembered or understood anything much of what Yusuf had told me. My English even was just a little girl's, I suppose; at least, it was a great deal simpler and scantier than what I speak now; for when Yusuf died I was only a child, and all I knew was so vague and childish.'

'But how old are you now, Meriem?' her cousin asked, looking hard at her strong fair face, with no little wonderment. 'It isn't so long since Uncle Clarence's death. You can't have been so very childish then, you know.'

'I'm sixteen now,' Meriem answered, after a short attempt to recollect exactly. 'So I must have been a little over twelve when Yusuf died, you see.'

Iris started.

'No more than sixteen!' she cried. 'Why, Meriem, you look as old as I, and I'm twenty-three my next birthday.'

'But in the South,' Meriem said, 'I've always heard we girls grow to be women a great deal earlier than in colder countries. I suppose that's the Kabyle half of my nature; though I seem to feel, since Vernon and you came, I'm a great deal more English than Kabyle at bottom. I seem to get so much nearer to Vernon and you than I ever could get to Ahmed or to Ayesha.'

'Then you've learnt to speak English much better of late?' Iris asked musingly.

'Oh yes,' Meriem answered; 'ever so much better. I've

learnt to express myself so much more easily. Since Vernon came, he and I have been talking together almost all the time. And I've learned to read English too, you see ; that's taught me a great many words and ideas I hadn't got in my head before. It seems as if I learnt more quickly than was possible. Not at all like learning to read the Koran. More like remembering, almost, than learning.'

Love is a most successful teacher of languages.

'I expect,' Iris suggested, after a moment's thought, 'your English nature had been growing up slowly, though never developing, for want of opportunity ; and when these two young men came, and you had English companionship, it burst out at once, like a dormant faculty, into full activity.'

'I think so,' Meriem answered, catching at once at the kernel of her meaning, though some of the words that enveloped it were still unfamiliar to her. 'I think I must have grown like a flower does, you know, before it opens, and the moment the right time for unfolding arrived, I must have opened naturally when the sunshine fell upon me.'

'What sunshine?' Iris asked, with a quiet smile.

Meriem had it in her heart to answer simply and truthfully, 'Vernon's ;' but a certain strange shyness she had never felt before in her life restrained her somehow, and she answered instead, quite prettily :

'Yours, Iris.'

The Third Classic leant forward, pleased at the compliment, and laid her white hand on Meriem's neck caressingly. As she did so, she touched the little box locket that Meriem wore round her throat always. The girl drew back with a half-startled look.

'Don't touch it !' she cried. 'You musn't take that off. It was Yusuf himself who hung that charm there, and he told me I must never, never let anyone except myself handle it.'

Iris withdrew her caressing fingers, half hurt at the rebuff.

'I see all you Kabyle girls wear them,' she said, less cordially. 'What is there in them ?'

'Some of them have a little red hand for luck,' Meriem answered, half blushing, with ingenuous shame, 'and some have the bone of a great saint, or a white rag of his blessed

clothing, and some have charms against the evil-eye, and some have a verse from the holy Koran.'

'But what's in yours?' Iris persisted once more.

'I don't know,' Meriem answered. 'I've never looked. It was Yusuf who hung it there. He told me to keep it very carefully.'

'But you ought to look, I think,' Iris went on, with insistence. 'Do let me take it off just once to see! Perhaps it may be something very important.'

Meriem drew back with the same startled and terrified look as before.

'Oh, don't touch it, Iris; don't touch it!' she cried 'Why, I wouldn't let even Vernon himself touch it.'

It was Iris's turn to start back now. Vernon, Vernon, always Vernon! A shade of displeasure passed for a moment over her bright face.

'You seem very fond of Mr. Blake,' she said chillily. 'And why do you always call him Vernon?'

'He told me to,' Meriem answered, looking up into her pretty English cousin's eyes with vague wonder and hesitancy. 'He said it was the right way to call him in English.'

'Not for a girl,' Iris objected decidedly. 'Girls don't call men by their names like that. I call him "Mr. Blake," don't you notice, Meriem?'

'Well, I called him Blake, too, at first,' Meriem went on, much puzzled at the strange discrepancy between her teachers; 'and Eustace and he laughed at me for doing it. They told me only men did so in England. A woman ought to call him by the name he's got for being a Christian—Vernon.'

'By his Christian name!' Iris cried disapprovingly. 'Oh no, Meriem; not unless—unless they're awfully intimate and at home together. Only, you know, when they've known one another ever so long, and like one another, oh—just immensely!'

'Well, I like Vernon just immensely,' Meriem answered, smiling.

'Why?' Iris asked with sharp decision.

'Who can tell? Because he paints and talks so beautifully, I suppose,' Meriem replied evasively.

A strange doubt rose, vague and undefined, in Iris's mind.

Till that moment, the terrible thought had never even occurred to her. She knew that Vernon Blake had constantly painted the beautiful Kabyle girl, and had reproduced her faultless form in every attitude of that simple idyllic mountain life with brush and with pencil; but it had never struck her as possible, any more than it had struck Vernon Blake himself, that anything more serious than mere artistic admiration could enter into his feelings towards the fair barbarian. Iris was immensely taken with Meriem in her own way; the novelty and freshness of the situation interested and amused her. She had greeted her half-wild Mohammedan cousin sympathetically, with a cousinly frankness, and had forgotten, as far as a woman can forget, the great gulf fixed for ever between them. But the gulf was vaguely there in the background all the time, for all that. Meriem was to Iris a charming and interesting and attractive savage, but a savage still at bottom, in spite of everything. She could never believe that Vernon Blake, that poetic soul, that exquisite artist, as she herself had found him in their brief intercourse, could dream of throwing himself away for life upon a mere graceful and beautiful wild creature like Meriem.

And more than that, far, Iris felt at that moment. The human heart (at twenty-three) is a most plastic object. She had known Vernon Blake for a fortnight only, but she woke up all at once at those stray words of Meriem's to a vivid consciousness that henceforth he was indeed a part of her life, a factor in her history she could never again get rid of, for good or for evil. From the very first time she ever saw him, it had been Vernon Blake all day and all night with her. Vernon Blake had echoed in her brain and reverberated through her being. If not love at first sight on her side, as on his, it was at any rate interest—a profound interest, an indefinable charm, an irresistible attraction.

‘Do you love him, Meriem?’ she asked suddenly.

Meriem looked back at her with perfect frankness. To the Kabyle girls of her village she would never have said a single word on that sacred subject. She could never have confided to them her love for a stranger, and that stranger an infidel. But Iris, as she said, like Vernon himself, had roused the half-awakened English side of her nature. To

Iris she felt she could confide everything, as an English girl confides in her bosom friend, freely and unreservedly. She glanced, with a certain amount of shyness, but with no pretence at concealment, at her dainty little cousin, as she answered simply :

' I love him, Iris, as I never could have loved one of our own people.'

' And does *he* love *you* ?' Iris asked, with a spasm.

Meriem's brow puckered up a little.

' I don't know,' she said, in a hesitating voice, pulling grasses from the crannies of the rock as she spoke. ' I can't make quite sure. You see, Iris, I don't understand your English ways ; and though I've been reading English novels and trying to understand them, I'm not so certain that I've really quite understood it all yet. Sometimes I think he does love me, because he talks so beautifully to me, and takes my face between his hands—like this, you know ; and sometimes, when he gets so flippant and strange, and talks such nonsense, I think he doesn't really care one bit for me, but only just wants to amuse himself a little—like what they call flirting in the English novels. Kabyles don't flirt ; we don't understand it. The last fortnight, especially, he's been often so. He's hardly taken any notice at all these days of me. But then, you see, he says he's done quite enough figures now, and he wants to go on painting at what he calls the background.'

Iris looked hard at her with a vague misgiving.

' Meriem,' she said, gasping, ' has he . . . has he ever said very much—you know how—to you ?'

Meriem thought deeply for a moment how to express her ideas before she spoke. Then she answered slowly, with great difficulty :

' I think he's talked to me . . . well, it's so awfully hard for me to say, of course, because our Kabyle men don't make love, you know, as you do in England ; they buy us and pay for us ; it's a matter of bargaining, like one does at market but I think, Iris, he's often talked to me . . . the way they make love in the English novels.'

' And taken your face in his hands—so ?' Iris went on, trembling, and holding Meriem's beautiful, shapely head between her palms as she spoke.

'Yes, just so, Iris,' Meriem answered, half whispering. Her face was like a red rose now. 'Do you think . . . do you think, dear, that means anything?'

The English girl's heart beat hard but slow, with long leaps and throbs, as she asked again faintly, 'And kissed you, Meriem?'

'Yes,' Meriem answered, in the same soft voice, getting frightened now. 'Was it wrong of me, Iris? . . . I was afraid it was wrong. I told him I thought so—that he oughtn't to do it. But he only laughed at me and said, "Oh no, people always kissed like that in England." Out here, in Kabylie, you know, men never kiss a girl, of course—not a nice girl, I mean—till they've bought her and paid for her, and the Taleb has read a chapter of the Koran over them. But in England, Vernon said it wasn't like that; that you didn't think it at all wrong; and in the English novels—for I looked on purpose—I saw that all the young men and girls kissed one another quite freely when . . . when they were really and truly fond of one another. So I thought Vernon must be really and truly very fond of me, as he kissed me so often. Was it awfully wrong of me, Iris? I couldn't ask Fatma or Ayesha, you see, because they wouldn't know; and if it was wrong, I didn't really mean it.'

'No, not wrong, dear,' Iris answered, with a spasmodic gulp; 'but—but—oh, Meriem!' And she broke down suddenly, and burst at once into a flood of tears.

Her heart was full almost to bursting. If for one short moment she thought harshly of Meriem, who could blame her? It was surely natural. Was this barefooted Kabyle girl, a mere waif of the mountains, to take away from her at one fell swoop—and of just right, too—everything on earth she most prized and cherished? A month ago, she had never seen Sidi Aia. To-day, she was willing to give up Sidi Aia to Meriem—it was Meriem's own. Had she not indeed come over to Algeria for that very purpose? A fortnight ago she had never seen Vernon Blake. To-day she could not give up her painter to Meriem without tearing at the very roots and fibres of her heart. Till then, she had never known how deep he had struck. She felt at that moment how profoundly she loved him.

Meriem, gazing at her in blank surprise, read at once the secret the Englishwoman had never yet spoken.

'Oh, Iris,' the mountain-bred girl exclaimed, flinging herself on her unconscious rival's neck, and bursting in her turn into a flood of hot tears, 'I didn't know it! I didn't suspect it! If I had, I would never have spoken to you so. I thought he admired you very much indeed—who could help admiring you? But I didn't think—I didn't think—I didn't think you loved him!'

'Hush!' Iris cried, looking round her in alarm. 'I never said so, Meriem. I never, never, never said so. Even to myself, I never once said so.'

'Has he told you he loves you?' Meriem cried, in suspense.

'No; he has never *told* me,' Iris answered, through her tears. 'But—you know how it is; he's let me feel, I suppose—you understand how—not by what he said, or even looked or did, but by what he didn't say, or look, or do, Meriem.'

The Kabyle girl rose, and gazed down upon the graceful and delicate English lady very compassionately. Her own soul was all seething within her.

'Iris,' she said slowly, with deep determination, 'you have nothing to cry for. Don't break your heart as he's broken mine. He never cared in the least for *me*. It was all empty I know it now. I see it at last. He was only amusing himself!'

'Then he had no right to break your heart, dear,' the Englishwoman answered, clinging hard to her hand. 'He had no right to flirt with you; he had no right to kiss you. I can see how deep the wound has gone. He must marry you, Meriem. You're rich, and he must marry you.'

In her passion of self-abnegation, she would give up all. Sidi Aia, and the property, and Vernon Blake, were Meriem's.

'I don't want the money,' Meriem answered low, her eyes now dry, and her bosom panting; 'but I did want—I did want Vernon.'

'You shall have him,' Iris repeated. 'He must marry you. I'll make him.'

Meriem flung herself at her cousin's feet once more, and

raising the hem of her dress to her lips, as she had done on the very first morning they met, she cried out earnestly :

‘Oh, Iris, you must take him ! When I look at you, and think that such a girl as you are willing to marry him, I wonder I was bold enough ever to dream he could look for a moment at a poor creature like me. Iris—Iris, I see it all now as clear as day. I tried for awhile to persuade myself he might, perhaps, really love me. But I know the truth now; and the truth has crushed me. He never, never, never cared at all, in his heart, for me.’

‘Then why did he kiss you ?’ Iris cried out fiercely. ‘Why did he hold your face so in his hands ? Why did he make love to you, and talk to you beautifully ? If he didn’t mean it, he was using you cruelly, and he shall never marry *me*, though he asked me on his knees, after acting like that. I shall never take him away from any other woman, who has so much better a claim on him than ever I could have.’

Meriem looked down at her own bare feet—that patent symbol of her low estate—in shame and mortification.

‘I was mad,’ she said, glancing from her own coarse haik to Iris’s exquisitely-made London dress, ‘to dream that Vernon could ever think of *me*, such a girl as I am ! I’ve broken the dream for ever now. I shall crush it down deep in my heart, Iris. For his own sake, even, I’d never clog him with myself. He shall marry you ; he shall marry you ; I shall make him marry you.’

‘It’s a trial of strength between us, then,’ Iris cried, in her passion of self-denial. ‘He was yours first. He shall be yours for ever.’

‘He was never mine,’ Meriem answered sadly. ‘He shall be yours for ever, as he has been, I know now, in my heart of hearts, from the very first moment he ever saw you.’

When Uncle Tom emerged from the Amine’s cottage, two minutes later, he saw those two girls, as he expressed it himself to Mrs. Knyvett the same afternoon, kissing and crying under a big olive-tree, and declaring they loved each other dearer than ever, and behaving for all the world before the eye of the sun like a couple of babies.

But as Uncle Tom and Iris rode away towards St. Cloud

once more, in varying moods (for Uncle Tom was elated at the pricking of this bubble) Hussein and Ahmed leaned up against a wall, and puffing slowly at their native cigarettes, watched the hated infidels well out of the village.

'She's pretty, the Christian girl,' Ahmed said with a smile to his former foe and rival, Hussein, still toying with his dagger, 'and very like Meriem, though a great deal more beautiful. It's a pity she should be thrown away upon a mere infidel.'

'Ay,' Hussein answered, with a generous wave of the hand towards the bidder he had displaced. 'Pretty she is, and fit for a Moslem. You may take Meriem yourself if you like, now, Ahmed. When Allah wills, I shall have the Christian woman.'

And that night, alone in her own room, Meriem, sitting by the dim light of a very Roman-looking earthenware lamp, filled with olive-oil and a floating wick, laid her hand dubiously on the charm round her neck, and then, with a sudden uncontrollable impulse, unfastening its clasp for the first time in her life . . . opened the spring lid, and looked gravely inside it.

What she saw there she told to no one; but it altered the whole tenor of her life thenceforward.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A HARD WRENCH.

To Uncle Tom's Lincoln's Inn intelligence, the settlement of the point that Clarence Knyvett's so-called marriage with the late lamented Halima, deceased, was no marriage at all by English law, had closed the episode of their visit to Algeria. So far as he was concerned, that loyal son of the British Bar, true lawyer to the core, was prepared forthwith to return to the classic shades of Old Square, leaving bare-legged Miss Meriem and her Paynim friends to their own devices thenceforth and for ever. To be sure, he would have favourably entertained any proposal from Iris to pension off her Uncle Clarence's alleged daughter with a modest pension of the most unassuming character. That small

moral claim he fully admitted. A man's flesh and blood may be said, in a certain sort of merely human way, to be more or less related to him. But that the girl had the slightest legal right to a single stiver of Sir Arthur's property—pooh, pooh! the notion was too utterly ridiculous to be seriously considered by a judicial mind for half a minute. So he straightway proposed an immediate return to his native land before Iris could involve herself any further in this foolish intimacy with a half-savage, left-handed Mahomedan cousin.

The Third Classic, however, to Uncle Tom's supreme disgust, refused to see matters in the same simple and legally-polarized light. The law, she said, in her irreverent fashion, as they conversed with animation that evening at the Fort, might declare Uncle Clarence was no relation at all to his own daughter till all was blue. She, for her part, defied the judges, and insisted upon taking a more natural biological view of the question. Coleridge, C.J., might talk himself black in the face to prove the contrary, and she wouldn't believe him. She maintained with obstinacy, in spite of Blackstone, the perverse opinion that father and child are more or less remotely connected by nature with one another, and that all the law and all the lawyers in England could never make them into strangers in blood, whatever they did to them. Besides, she wanted to stop and see more of Meriem. She wanted to decide in her own mind what must be done about the matter of the inheritance.

She did not add to Uncle Tom—perhaps she did not add even to herself—that she wanted also to consider what must be done about Vernon Blake, and how she was to tear away her own poor little heart from that too attractive and cohesive painter.

'Madame will be tired of us,' Uncle Tom suggested, as a last resort. 'She can hardly mean to take us all in as lodgers at nothing a week for an indefinite period.'

But madame, who just caught at the meaning of his sentence as he let it drop, interposed with something more than mere French politeness to assure her dear friends she would be delighted for her part to put them up on those terms for ever and ever. And so, in truth, she would no doubt have been; for the little women loved society; and

in this dull place, *que voulez-vous, monsieur ?* Must one die of *ennui* ?

So Uncle Tom in the end retired, worsted, as he always did from an encounter with Iris. Those persistent Knyvetts, with their sentiments and emotions, were invariably too much for his common-sense legalism. They could twist him round their little fingers, as he himself could twist and turn an unwilling witness. His very side-issues broke down hopelessly. If Mrs. Knyvett's bronchitis, as Iris averred, really made it impossible to return at this time of year from a warm climate to the fogs of England, why couldn't they, at least, retire upon their own snug and comfortable villa at Algiers, till Amelia was well again ?

But Iris said *no*, with her pretty little foot and the family emphasis, and Uncle Tom, squashed flat under the weight of her crushing negative, was forced to submit to that imperative gesture. Iris would never leave Grande Kabylie, she declared, till she'd settled the two subjects that now lived most of all in her mind—Meriem's fortune and Meriem's love-affair. Meriem must take it all—all—all from her. Meriem must have Uncle Arthur's fortune. . . . Meriem must marry that handsome painter.

In those two firm resolves, Iris sobbed herself wearily to sleep with self-righteous pride that night in her own bedroom at the Fort at St. Cloud. The fortune, indeed, she could give up readily ; but not the painter—no, not the painter.

Yet her pretty eyes were none the redder for her tears, when she sallied forth from the Fort next morning, with madame and the faithful officer of the Génie, and turned her steps in vague expectation towards the spot where Blake was still so ardently displaying his practical devotion to landscape backgrounds.

The painter was there, as madame had expected ; for madame, all French though she was in her ideas of the proprieties, yet entered with zest into this romantic little episode of English love-making, the first she had ever seen outside the yellow covers of a translated novel.

'I find that charming,' she said, in an undertone, to her friend the officer ; 'we have nothing like it, *pour le bon motif, du moins*, on our side of the Channel. There is in it the

element of free choice, of romance, of individual preference, and yet it's all so innocent, oh, *mon Dieu, de l'innocence ! Tandis que chez nous autres,*' and she broke off, sighing.

For she herself had been married at eighteen, to an eligible person of the same fortune, by mutual arrangement between her own family and M. l'Administrateur's.

Her poor little faded rags of romance had all come afterwards ; and innocence was not precisely the exact attribute that delighted the soul of the officer of the Génie.

They sat down and criticised Blake's picture for awhile ; then madame and her slave wandered off discursively into gossip of the Fort and the surrounding colony. Had monsieur seen the new Commandant's wife at the next post ? What was her probable age, allowing for paint ? And was she really so very pretty ?

'Pretty ! yes, *je vous l'accorde*, pretty. But that was all. A most sad affair. She hadn't the sou. Her husband had married her *par pure dépravation ; je vous assure, madame, par pure dépravation.*'

Madame laughed, and raised her pencilled eyebrows. That was wrong, she said ; extremely wrong—and at such a crisis. A French official should be married in these days—married, of course, because it was necessary he should be doubly rich ; he must sustain the dignity of France among strangers ; but to marry *sans le sou*, that, for example, in madame's opinion, was sheer wickedness.

Vernon Blake lifted his eyes timidly from his canvas as she spoke, and caught Iris's. He couldn't forbear a meaning smile. The whole point of view was so thoroughly un-English. Iris dropped her own modest eyelids in return. The mute little pantomime was not thrown away on madame's keen glance.

'*J'ai passé par là,*' she thought to herself good-humouredly ; for she, too, had been in Arcadia. And besides, she was not averse, in her present humour, to a quiet *tête-à-tête* herself, with the officer of the Génie.

'Come on, *mon ami,*' she cried of a sudden to her companion, in a very low tone, seizing his arm spasmodically. 'These two have affairs of their own to settle. Let us not derange them. Let us admire the landscape.' And they admired the landscape on their own account, a hundred

yards off, round the corner of the rock, with that other element of individual preference thrown in, which, though not so guileless, is more peculiarly charming to the French idiosyncrasy.

'What a funny way of looking at it!' Iris said, with a smile, as they found themselves alone, with her heart beating hard; 'so very different from our English ideas, you know! With us, of course, it seems quite natural a man should marry a penniless girl, and work hard for her, and try to make her happy. We think it wrong to marry for money. But they both seemed to think, on the contrary, it was almost wicked for a man to marry a girl who had nothing.'

Vernon Blake's breath came and went in gasps.

'Yes,' he said slowly, pretending to fiddle with his brush at a painted leaf in the foreground as he spoke. 'I think, myself, I should much prefer the girl I wished to marry should have nothing of her own. I should like to spend my life, as you say, in working hard for her, and if ever I attained to wealth and fame and honour and dignity, to lay everything I'd earned as an offering at her feet, if only she'd accept it.

I think it's more manly and more natural so. The man should labour and slave for the woman. . . . But suppose, Miss Knyvett, a man were by chance to light some day upon a woman whom he could love, whom he could admire, whom he could adore, whom he could die for—a woman towards whom he could look up with profound reverence—a woman whom he felt at once immeasurably his superior, and yet, in other ways, his helpmeet and his counterpart—a woman to whom he could give, as Shelley says, the worship the soul lifts above, and the heavens reject not—suppose a man were to meet such a woman as that, whom on all other grounds he would wish, if he dared, to make his wife, and, as fate would have it, he happened to be poor, and she happened to be rich'—he looked at her appealingly—'do you think . . . do you think . . . in such a case it would be quite wrong of him, taking into consideration how much they might happen to have in common (as you yourself suggested the other day)——' and he broke off suddenly. Iris's face was crimson now. She looked down and answered nothing. He longed in his heart to stoop forward and kiss her.

But Iris felt a sudden storm convulse her bosom. As the painter spoke, his words thrilled her. She knew he loved her—she knew she loved him. But he was Meriem's first. She must give him up, against her will, to Meriem.

Blake paused for a minute, and watched her silently. Then he spoke once more.

'Don't you think, too,' he said, longing for some little word of encouragement before he dared to go on, 'that in such a case a man would often shrink sensitively from asking the girl he loved, for fear his motives might be cruelly misconstrued?'

With a terrible effort, Iris did what she thought right.

'I don't think my cousin Meriem would misconstrue your motives,' she answered slowly, pretending to misunderstand his plain meaning. 'Of course she'll be rich when she comes into Uncle Arthur's money, as I mean she shall do; but she was not rich when when you first paid attentions to her; and she could hardly think, under such circumstances, you meant to ask her for anything except her own sake.'

The painter drew back with a shock of surprise.

'Miss Knyvett,' he cried, in a pained voice, 'you're playing with me! You're teasing me! You're intentionally shutting your eyes to what I mean. At such a moment, it isn't right or kind of you. You can't seriously think I'm in love with Meriem.' And he seized her hand in his own, and held it violently.

Iris struggled hard to release it, but in vain.

'Let go my hand!' she said at last in an angry, authoritative tone; and Blake, surprised, let it go instantly, in answer to that imperious Knyvett voice. Her lips trembled, but she nerved herself up and said her say, straight out, for all that. 'I don't know why not,' she answered evasively. 'Meriem's beautiful; Meriem's rich; Meriem's an heiress in her own right; Meriem's my Uncle Clarence's daughter; I don't know why any man shouldn't be proud and pleased to marry Meriem.'

'And after I've seen *you*, Iris?'

He said it boldly. He said it softly. He called her by her name. He was not afraid to do it. In spite of herself, in spite of her conscience, in spite of her stern sense of duty to Meriem, Iris felt a sudden thrill of

unwonted joy course down her spine as she heard him call her so. It was sweet to have won the heart of that beautiful creator of beautiful images, come what might of it. Sweet to have won it, if only for a day. Though she must give him up to Meriem—for he was Meriem's first—she didn't attempt to conceal from herself the delicious fact that she loved to know she had gained his love. As he stood there, appealing, with his two hands clasped, their fingers intertwining close in one another, he looked as grand and as fair as a young Greek god. She was glad in her soul to know he loved her.

But she crushed it all down with unconquerable force. She was a Knyvett born; no weakness for her, even where a woman's heart was concerned. She looked back at him coldly, though those quivering lips belied her words.

'Meriem told me all last night,' she answered, with a pang. 'You made love to her long before ever I came here. You made love to her when she was still poor and a nobody. You must marry her now she's a rich lady, and Uncle Arthur's heiress; for it's I, after all, who am poor and a nobody, you see, nowadays.'

Vernon Blake's heart gave a great bound.

'I'm glad of that, Iris,' he cried, still more boldly, with a burst of delight, 'for then you'll know it's *you* I ask and want; like Lord Ronald with Lady Clare, you, and you only.'

It was hard on poor Iris, undeniably hard. She saw he meant it; she saw how the blood came quick into his cheek as she said those words. It was for herself he loved her, not for lands or money. Had she followed the promptings of her own soft heart, she would have flung herself at once, in sweet abandonment, upon the painter's bosom. But a sterner tyrant ruled her actions. The Knyvett conscience, aglow with indignation, rose in full revolt.

'Mr. Blake,' she cried, starting back, and assuming a virtuous anger she only felt with half her nature, 'how dare you call me by my Christian name, when you know you've made love for months to Meriem? How dare you be so untrue, and unkind, and unfaithful to her? Don't try to conceal the facts from me, please, or to gloss them over, or to make light of them easily. You won't succeed, for

Meriem told me all last night; and I see what it means; you must marry Meriem!

'Never,' Blake answered, hot in the face, but disregarding her orders. 'I'll marry you, or nobody, Iris.'

He needed no wizard now to tell him she loved him. He could see so much plainly for himself. Only this wretched phantom of an imagined Meriem stood between them. And, for Meriem's sake, she would wreck all—wreck their joint lives that might be made so beautiful!

Iris gazed back at him like a marble Nemesis.

'Meriem told me,' she answered, with stern self-restraint, 'you've made love to her the way they make love in English novels. She told me you'd taken her face in your hands and kissed her often. She told me everything that passed between you. Do you think after that, in your own conscience, you've any right to marry anyone else but Meriem?'

Blake looked down at the ground with awkward shyness.

'It was the merest flirtation,' he answered, on the defensive. 'I never meant anything but just——'

'To amuse yourself! Yes, yes; that's it, I know. You meant to amuse yourself. It was only that to you, perhaps, I dare say; but to Meriem—— Mr. Blake, how dare you tell me so? Don't you see she loves you! You'll break that girl's heart unless you marry her.'

'And *your* heart?' Blake cried, with a sudden burst of audacity. Love gives the most modest man a wonderful boldness. 'How about *your* heart—your own heart, Iris?'

The English girl winced. It was a home-thrust.

'My heart must break, too, if need be,' she answered, all taken aback, with a flush of passion.

'Then you *do* love me!' Blake cried, springing forward eagerly.

Iris bent her head and blushed crimson. She thought she was only abandoning the merest outwork when she was really giving up the entire citadel.

'I *do* love you,' she answered slowly. 'But I can never marry you. If *I* can give *it* up, so can *you*. I will never rest till you marry Meriem.'

The painter's heart leapt up once more with a wild delight.

'If you admit so much,' he said, 'I needn't despair. When a woman says she loves you, all has been said. I

kissed her, I grant you. I've kissed before. If a kiss is to count for a contract of marriage—why, then——' And he stepped forward boldly, and, with an unexpected assault, printed his lips on Iris's forehead.

The startled girl sprang back as if she had been stung. That kiss thrilled her through in every nerve. But she knew it was wrong; her conscience chilled her.

'Mr. Blake!' she cried, one flush of scarlet, 'never dare again to touch me as long as you live! You had no right to take such an advantage of my trust. I'll never forgive you till you've married Meriem. And now, if you please, I'll go back to madame.'

But in her own room at the Fort that night she lay on her bed for hours, in her evening dress, with the candle burning, and sobbed her throat sore with love and misery.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

COUNTERPLOT.

IN London, meanwhile, in the privacy of his chambers, Harold Knyvett, Esquire, of the Board of Trade, and of the Cheyne Row Club, Piccadilly, had been silently working out his own plans to confound that muddling old fool, Whitmarsh, and to secure the hand of his cousin Iris. For, oddly enough, it was not so much now revenge as desire that goaded on Harold Knyvett's soul to a policy of reprisals. He had suddenly awaked that evening at West Kensington to the previously obscure fact that he was in love with Iris—positively in love with her—and the knowledge of that fact, brought home to him in a flash at the moment when Iris had rejected his suit with scorn and contumely, had impelled him forward, ever since, in a characteristic scheme for winning back, at one stroke, both his cousin and the property. So long as he believed, in his own cynical words, that 'at the present day any man may have any girl he likes for the asking,' it had never occurred to him that he was in love with Iris. The fruit was ripe to his hand when he chose to pick it. Imagining, in his own heart, he might 'marry the girl whenever he liked,' money or no money, 'by

approaching her in a proper spirit from the side of the emotions,' he cared but little more for that particular girl than for any other of the five hundred well-favoured young women who, as he still firmly and fondly held, would jump down his throat any day if he opened his mouth at them. But, as soon as he had learned, by actual experiment, that this one particular maiden did not ardently desire the honour of his alliance, it suddenly struck him, with a burst of surprise, that in his heart of hearts he wanted Iris, and no girl but Iris could possibly satisfy him.

It was not a very noble form of love, to be sure. Harold Knyvett's very affections were all purely selfish. What he thought to himself every day, more and more, now that Iris was gone over sea to Algeria, was simply this—that nobody could ever please him like Iris. With Iris, he could be happy, comfortable, contented, at his ease; a pleasant companion secured him for ever; no idle gossip or silly chatter to disturb his tranquil enjoyment of his after-dinner claret; a sensible girl, with a head on her shoulders, ever ready to soothe him with her finer fancies, to touch him with her lighter thought. A man of culture should have a woman of culture as a helpmeet for him. Harold Knyvett recognised in his lofty soul that the Third Classic was his pre-established harmony, the very woman intended by Heaven to keep such a man as himself company.

And the longer he stopped away from Iris, the more profoundly each day did he feel himself in love with her. How he could ever have been such a fool as not to recognise the fact earlier, he couldn't imagine; and that he, Harold Knyvett, of all men in the world, should have been such a fool was almost as remarkable a phenomenon in its way as even that he should admit himself for once to have been so. A fine girl, if ever there was one; and with character, intellect, conversation, wit—everything he prized—to back up the mere external charms of a pretty face and a well-turned figure. Her hand was the daintiest little hand in London; and the tiny feet that played under the skirts of her evening dress—well, Harold Knyvett was fain to confess in reflective moments that those tiny feet were simply ravishing.

The more he thought of them, then, the more abundantly clear did it become to his logical intelligence that, since he

loved them, he must bring their owner down on her knees in the dust before him. She had sent him off, to be sure, that evening at West Kensington, with a most undignified and unqualified dismissal. But what of that? Girls never know their own minds for ten minutes together. *Amantium ira amoris integratio est* (as a man of taste, Harold Knyvett could even make metre out of a Latin senarius), and when she found he had come in, after all, to Sir Arthur's property, she would descend gracefully, no doubt, from her high horse, and, with some preliminary pretence at coyness, consent to marry the heir of Sidi Aia. What's worth winning's worth playing for. And Harold Knyvett, being a born gambler, was quite prepared to play a high stake for his cousin Iris.

Sir Arthur had never altered his will. Harold Knyvett determined to alter it for him.

It was a big piece of work, to be sure—a risky job—and it required caution. One must put judgment into this sort of thing, of course. No precipitancy. Go to work slowly, judiciously, carefully, warily. That old fool Whitmarsh, ass as he was, had acquired an undoubted technical knack in detecting and exposing—well, colourable imitations of dead men's signatures; for, in polite society, we never call them to ourselves even 'forgeries.' But what Harold Knyvett meant to do was to find somewhere a will of Sir Arthur's, leaving everything to himself personally, and duly attested by two good witnesses, both of whom must be conveniently dead, both of whom must possess at least a fair show of probability, and both of whose signatures must survive the ordeal of that old fool Whitmarsh's professional scrutiny.

Now nobody has any idea how difficult a matter it is to forge a really plausible will (*experto crede*) until he comes to try it himself experimentally. First of all—but that is the smallest problem of any—you have to imitate the testator's signature by gradual steps till you can write it off-hand with freedom and ease like your own name; for the smallest appearance of stiffness or formality, the faintest indication of doubt or deliberation, the remotest hint of unfamiliarity or weakness, becomes before the prying gaze of the expert in handwriting absolutely fatal. The Chabots and the Pallisers will force your hand. Every letter must be turned out

boldly at a dash ; every stroke and line must be natural and seemingly quite unpremeditated. Men write their signatures so often, indeed, that the fingers acquire an instinctive twist ; it's far harder to copy successfully those few flowing curves of a native twirl than to imitate a page of ordinary manuscript.

When Harold Knyvett had managed by assiduous practice, however (on scraps of paper, all religiously burnt as soon as written), to turn out an imitation of Sir Arthur's hand that even Netherclift himself would have hesitated to declare an undoubted forgery, the hardest part of his task still remained to him. He had letters enough of Sir Arthur's from which to work, in the first instance, and he studied them all so carefully and minutely that he could at last produce an almost perfect facsimile of the cramped and crabbed twists of the old General's gouty signature. But the will itself, with its manifold pitfalls, was a far harder and more ticklish matter. In the first place, you have to draw up something, in a legal hand and with legal phraseology, which will bear the suspicious gaze of eminent Q.C.'s, and outlive the sniffing and flaw-hunting criticism of spectacled juniors. Then there are the outsiders, those two fearsome outsiders, who, as the attestation clause charmingly phrases it, with more legal precision than literary beauty, 'being present at the same time in testator's presence, at his request, and in the presence of each other, have hereto subscribed their names as witnesses.' How much needless trouble they gave poor Harold ! how nearly they drove him to the verge of despair, in the vain attempt to make quite sure of their historical existence, their date of death, and their freedom from the disastrous taint of an *alibi*.

For Sir Arthur's will, from the very nature of the case, must necessarily have been executed either at Algiers or Aix. At no date subsequent to the execution of the first will in Iris's favour had Sir Arthur ever returned to England. Now, that awkward circumstance made the witness question a peculiarly delicate one for the amateur to handle. Harold's problem, netly put, amounted, in fact, to just this : how to find two likely persons at Aix or Algiers, both now defunct, both well known of late years to Sir Arthur, and both of whom he could be quite sure might possibly have been at a

certain place on a certain date, without fear of any meddling—some lawyer's proving that one of them on that day was actually elsewhere. For on one point Harold had made up his mind: he would run no risk; if he forged a will, nobody on earth would ever be able to say it was a probable forgery. They might think so, of course, as much as they liked; thought is free in a free country—so long as you don't express it in speaking or writing. But to say so—no; Harold Knyvett would so manage the thing that whatever suspicions old Whitmarsh might harbour they should be suspicions only, incapable of proof before judge and jury. As a man of culture he objected to the crude contrasts of prison dress; he would not waste his valuable time in doing fourteen years of enforced seclusion among the uninteresting scenery of Portland or of Prince's Town.

'*Labor omnia vincit*,' said the Knyvett motto that surrounded the crest on Harold's neat and dainty hand-laid notepaper; and assiduous care did, indeed, at last conquer all difficulties in the discovery of two defunct possible witnesses, whose presence together in St. Arthur's rooms at Aix, on a given day in the summer before last, was, to say the least of it, not plainly disprovable. With infinite pains Harold hunted them up. He had first to take into his service, indeed, in the guise of a kinsman grateful for attention bestowed, that double-faced scoundrel, Sir Arthur's valet, Gilbert Montgomery, whose deep-dyed treachery he abhorred and despised with all the strength of his own manly and simple nature. He had then, by dexterous side-hints and careful leading questions, to find out from this dangerous tool all about Sir Arthur's habits and Sir Arthur's cronies, without too obviously exciting Montgomery's suspicions. He had to fix upon two persons both dead, both at Aix at the same time, and both likely to be asked to act as witnesses. He had to hunt up among Sir Arthur's papers (which Montgomery sold him) letters from both these persons, to imitate their handwriting, and to make sure of a day on which both might reasonably have called upon Sir Arthur without danger of anybody urging the awkward fact that on that particular afternoon one or both were ill in bed, or absent at Geneva, or engaged in some other incompatible pursuit, place or occupation. In the end, however, Harold's

ceaseless pains provided against every possible contingency, and triumphed over every prospective assault of the leader of the Probate and Divorce Division. The will, in fact, was a perfect gem of forgery, calculated to deceive the very elect; so clever a fraud had never been perpetrated since Thomas Kynnersley Whitmarsh first ate his dinners at Lincoln's Inn in the callow days of the newly-fledged half-century.

So Harold Knyvett said to himself with no small satisfaction as he surveyed the document one autumn evening in the safe solitude of his own bedroom. No detail had been neglected that leads on to success. The very paper was French, from Sir Arthur's desk at Aix-les-Bains; the ink was sand-powdered with French precision; the tape to tie it was bought in Paris; the watermark was true to year and month; everything was *en règle* with consummate forethought. As a matter of fact, Harold Knyvett had forgotten nothing. He was determined not to be caught out in a scholar's mate; and he surveyed his own work, when complete, with parental pride, as a specimen of what a man of intelligence can do when he seriously devotes his mind to forgery.

And now but one thing was left—to discover it.

Discovering a forged will is in itself an art. Foolish precipitancy in this respect may spoil everything. You may make your forgery itself as safe as houses, and yet, if you produce it without a history, so to speak, or let it drop from a clear sky, unaccounted for, you lay yourself open to the most absurd suspicions by not being able to show cause for its due preservation. Harold Knyvett had thought of that difficulty too, but as yet he hardly saw his way well out of it. On one point only he was quite clear; he must find the will in Sir Arthur's rooms at Aix or at Mustapha. How to account for his presence at either place at this critical juncture was the sole remaining problem before him. And to the plausible solution of that one problem Harold now addressed himself.

He must get to Algeria, as it were, by accident.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LE MARCHANT BREAKS SILENCE.

ON the very same morning when Iris and Vernon Blake were having their little love passage together by the hillside at St. Cloud, Meriem had come out to the tent at Beni-Merzoug to ask assistance from her friend Le Marchant. A new-born desire had arisen in her soul, the desire to read English handwriting.

'I want you to show me, Eustace,' she said in her simple, straightforward way, 'how they make the letters in England when they write to one another.'

'You want to learn to write English, in fact,' Eustace answered, smiling.

'Partly that,' the girl replied with half a blush. 'But partly more, I want to learn how to read a letter.'

'In case Vernon should ever send you one, I suppose,' Le Marchant said with a subdued sadness in his eye and lips.

'No!' Meriem answered very decisively. 'Vernon shall never, never write to me. Vernon shall marry my cousin Iris. I've made up my mind firmly to that. I wanted to learn for another reason.'

She spoke decidedly, with concentrated determination, though it was clear the words cost her much; and Le Marchant, looking keenly through and through her, read her too far to harrow her just then with any further questioning. It would cost her a wrench to give up her painter. But the wrench must come, Le Marchant knew well. He saw that Blake was in love with Iris, and he was sure he would never dream of marrying Meriem.

He brought out some paper and pen and ink, and set Meriem a copy of *a, b, c*, in the usual formal writing-master style. Meriem sat down to it, by a flat rock, with characteristic determination. She had a reason for learning English manuscript-hand now; and, till she had learnt it, no spare moment should be spent or wasted on any other subject.

For the next few days, accordingly, Meriem toiled hard at her new writing, but especially at deciphering the strange

characters she herself had written. What she wanted most to do, however, was to read what was written in other people's hands; and to this end she made Le Marchant write down many simple words for her, and then read them herself at sight as well as she was able. By the end of a week, her progress was remarkable; previous knowledge of the cursive Arab had stood her in good stead; and she found to her surprise she could spell out a page of English manuscript with decent certainty, though by slow stages. And when once she had reached that point, she spent many hours shut up by herself in her own bedroom in the Amine's cottage, poring hard over something held close to her face, of which she told naught to anyone anywhere.

'Eustace,' she said suddenly, a morning or two later, appearing with a flushed face at the tent-door, 'you can speak French. I want to know if you'll come with me some time over to St. Cloud, and find out something from the people down there for me.'

Le Marchant rose with a pleased face. Of late, Meriem had been very friendly with him. She wasn't the least little bit in the world in love with him, of course; that he knew well. He made himself no vain illusions on that foolish score. Meriem loved Vernon Blake, and her love for Vernon Blake was far too profound to allow of room in her heart for any possible rival. Still, she was friendly, uncommonly friendly. She had learned to trust him and rely upon him as a friend, with a frank trustfulness which no English girl in our conventional world could easily have imitated. For that measure of intimacy Le Marchant was grateful; he liked to see that Meriem trusted him; he was sorry her love was so hopeless and so desperate.

'What do you want to find out?' he asked, coming out to the door, and taking her hand in his, with friendly sincerity.

'Can I trust you?' Meriem asked, looking him hard in the face.

'You can trust me, Meriem; implicitly; for anything.'

'So I think,' she answered, with her keen glance fixed upon his truthful eyes. 'You are always kind to me. I believe you. I'll trust you. Well, then, I want to know . . . whether they have any register books kept at St.

Cloud of people's marriages earlier than the Christian year 1870.'

Le Marchant started. 'Why so?' he asked, in no little surprise.

'Eustace,' the girl said, very seriously, laying her hand upon his arm with a sudden pressure, 'if I tell you this, you promise on your honour never to breathe a word of it to anybody.'

'I will never breathe a word of it to anybody, Meriem, if you ask me not.'

'Then this is why. I know you won't betray me. I think the books must all have been destroyed in the great insurrection of 1251—what the Christians call 1870. I hope they were. I'm sure they must have been. For the Kabyles attacked and burned down the Fort, and killed almost every living soul in the place, and even Madame l'Administratrice herself only escaped by walking across the snow in her light dressing-gown.'

'And why do you wish the books to have been burnt?' Le Marchant asked once more, with some dim anticipation of Meriem's probable meaning.

'Because,' Meriem answered, clutching his arm hard, 'my father and mother were married at St. Cloud—secretly married in the Christian way, before a priest, and also at the Mairie—early in the beginning of 1870.'

'How do you know that?' Le Marchant asked, astonished.

Meriem shook her head with a decisive negation. 'Don't ask me how I know it,' she cried, her fingers playing nervously meanwhile with her amulet. 'I'm not going to tell you. Nobody shall know. But if the books at St. Cloud are really destroyed, nobody on earth will ever be able to prove it.'

'And you don't want it proved?' Le Marchant exclaimed, with rising admiration.

'I don't want it proved,' the girl answered eagerly. 'Why should I, indeed? It could only distress me. I don't want to take all this money from Iris. Iris shall keep it, for Vernon loves her. She shall marry Vernon, and break my heart. But Vernon will have it, for he loves Iris.'

'And you?' Eustace asked, looking back at her with pity.

‘And me? I’ll stop and marry Hussein or Ahmed, or any other man my uncle may sell me to.’

Le Marchant looked once more at her with infinite tenderness. But he said nothing. It must not be—it could not be; something must be done somehow to prevent it. But the time to speak out was not yet come. They started in silence, with heavy hearts, to walk over to St. Cloud, alone—together.

On the way they spoke to each other but little. Both were full of their own thoughts. It was only after they had reached St. Cloud, and Eustace had satisfied himself, by full inquiries, that the register of the *Etat Civil*, previous to 1870, had indeed been destroyed in the great rebellion, that they began to talk at all freely. Meriem’s mind was relieved by the discovery.

‘That’s well,’ she said, with a sigh; ‘that’s well, Eustace. Now Iris and Vernon can keep their money.’

Eustace made sure, in his own mind, she had learnt the real or supposed fact from some Kabyle woman in the village—some confidante, perhaps, of her dead mother; and he agreed with her that even if true it would now be all but impossible to prove it. So he turned back once more, half relieved like herself, since she would have it so, to find that her vague claim to the Knyvett estates grew even more shadowy. If Meriem was satisfied, what right on earth had he to wish it otherwise?

Half-way home, they sat down on a projecting ledge of rock that overhung the valley—a ledge under the shade of a gnarled old olive-tree; and while they rested, Eustace murmured to himself, as if by accident almost, Meriem’s own words, ‘I will stop and marry Hussein or Ahmed, or any other man my uncle may sell me to!’

Meriem gazed up in his face with a half-defiant air. Those fearless nostrils of hers quivered as she spoke; but she said with no faltering note in her voice, ‘Yes, I mean it, Eustace; let Iris take Vernon, and I’ll marry Hussein.’

Le Marchant’s face was very earnest. He took the girl’s white hand in his own unresisted. Meriem liked him, and let him take it. ‘Meriem,’ he said, with his eyes fixed full on hers, ‘listen to me a moment. I want to speak to you seriously. You must never, never marry a Kabyle.’

'I must,' Meriem answered, 'if my uncle sells me to him.'

Le Marchant knew his hope was infinitesimal; but for Meriem's sake he ventured to speak out.

'Meriem,' he went on again, with a lingering cadence on each syllable of her name, 'the time is short, and I want to save you. I know your uncle means to marry you off shortly. I know you love Vernon and not me. I know Vernon will never marry you. But I can't endure to think you should pass your life—you, whom I have learnt to know and love and admire—a slave to one of your countrymen in the village here. To me, this summer has been a very happy one. I've watched you and talked with you till I know you and feel towards you as towards an English lady. I know how deep and profound is your nature. Meriem, you must never marry Hussein or Ahmed. I don't ask you to love me, I don't expect you at first to love me; but for your own sake I ask you at least to wait and marry me—to save you from Ahmed or Hussein, or their like; do, Meriem, marry me.'

Meriem gazed back at him with her frank, fearless gaze.

'I can never marry any man but Vernon,' she answered quietly.

'But you're going to marry Ahmed or Hussein!' Le Marchant cried in a pleading voice. 'Why not me as well as either of them? Surely, Meriem, you like me more than you like Hussein!'

'But that's quite different,' Meriem answered slowly, endeavouring to disentangle her own mind to herself to her own satisfaction. 'I could marry a Kabyle, because that's not marrying at all, you know, in the way people marry in the English books—in the way I might marry you or Vernon. That's merely being Hussein or Ahmed's slave—picking up sticks and making *cous-cous* for them. I've expected that all my life long. It's nothing new to me. I ought to be prepared for it. . . . But to marry *you*, Eustace, would be quite different. I could never marry any Englishman at all, except Vernon.'

'Meriem,' Le Marchant urged once more, holding her hand tight in his eager grip, and pleading earnestly, 'I

don't ask you to marry me for my own sake in the least, though I love you dearly, and have always loved you. I ask you to marry me to get you away from this place altogether; I want you to put yourself into freer and more natural and congenial surroundings, to save your own life from Hussein or Ahmed. Oh, Meriem, don't throw your life away! For your own sake, pause a moment and think. I want to take you, and save you from drudgery. Marry me first; you may learn to love me by degrees afterwards.'

Meriem stroked the fingers that held her own with her left hand tenderly.

'Eustace,' she said, in a very soft voice, not untinged with a certain profound regret, 'I like you dearly. I know you and trust you. I'm very fond of you. Except Vernon, there's nobody else I like as I like you. In a way, I love you. I love you almost as I loved Yusuf. You've always been kind to me. You've been more than thoughtful. From the very first day when you came to Beni-Merzoug, I've always seen and noticed how kind you were. Kinder than Vernon. I've seen that, too, all along, of course. *You* thought of *me*, while *he* thought of himself and his own pleasure. You never spoke one word of love; you loved me silently, and tried to help me. I know all that; I recognise all that; don't think me ungrateful; I like you dearly; I love you as a sister might love a brother. But see how strangely our hearts are built! I know all that; yet I love Vernon, and I could marry Vernon. I could never marry you, and partly just because I like you so dearly. I could marry Vernon because I love him; I could marry Hussein because I hate him; but you, never! because I like you, and love you as a brother!' And with a simple, graceful womanly impulse she raised his trembling hand to her lips and kissed it affectionately. 'Dear Eustace,' she said, looking up at him, still with brimming eyes, 'I wish I could say *yes*, if it would give you pleasure. But I *must* say no. I'm very, very, very sorry.'

Eustace clasped her hand yet harder in his own.

'Meriem,' he cried, with the calm but deep emotion of middle life, 'if you won't marry me, you shan't get rid of me. I'll stop here still to watch over you and protect you. I know what sort of life you'll have to lead. But they shall

never harm you. Try at least to remain single for me. It's intolerable to think such a woman as you should be Hussein's slave. A woman like you, so grand and sweet ! And, perhaps, in time you may forget Vernon and learn to love me.'

'I've learnt to love you long ago, Eustace,' Meriem answered, with a smile through her tearful eyes ; 'but I shall never, never forget Vernon. Iris may take him ; I want her to take him ; I love Iris and I love Vernon, and I want them both to be happy together ; but as long as I live I shall never forget him. I shall never forget your goodness, either ; but my heart—my heart—my heart is Vernon's.'

And she held it tight to keep it from bursting.

Le Marchant rose and kissed her forehead chivalrously.

'My child,' he said, leaning over her with infinite regretful tenderness, 'I'm no boy who mistakes his first calf-love for a grand passion. I've seen many women ; I've loved some ; but I never loved any woman before as I love you, Meriem. I loved you from the first ; what you've said to-day has made me love you better than ever. I admire you because you have a strong nature. I know I have a strong nature, too. Strong natures go forth naturally to one another. Some day, Meriem, I believe you will love me. But, love me or not, I will never forsake you. For your own sake, I'll stand by you, and protect you, and watch over you. You are to me a new interest in life. I can never let you fall into Hussein's clutches. Come on, my child ; it's growing late now, and thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you have said to-day in my favour.'

CHAPTER XXX.

SYMPTOMS.

It was a distinct surprise to Harold Knyvett to receive, a few days later, a note from his Aunt Amelia, couched in comparatively affectionate terms, and dated from 'The Fort, St. Cloud, Algeria.'

Communications with the rival branch of the Knyvett family had of course been interrupted for Harold of late ; he

had heard nothing from that high-stepping girl, Iris, herself, since the memorable evening when he had proposed, to his shame, and been promptly rejected. But he was glad to find Aunt Amelia, at least—good, easy soul!—didn't share her daughter's alienated feelings. It was something to have the maternal authority more or less on his side; and, thinking thus, Harold accepted the note as a *rapprochement*, an indirect reopening of relations between the two high contracting parties. If Aunt Amelia held out the right hand of friendship to-day, it might fairly be expected that that recalcitrant daughter of hers, for all her fads and fancies, would follow suit most amicably to-morrow.

'MY DEAR HAROLD,' Mrs. Knyvett wrote, without the faintest show of resentment, or even, for that matter, of Christian forgiveness either, 'please excuse pencil. Here we are, up in a heathenish place among the snowy mountains, which they call Grande Kabylie, stopping at a fort, where an outbreak of the natives, it seems, may be any moment expected, and indebted for our daily (sour) bread to the hospitality of a frivolous and ill-regulated young Frenchwoman, whose manners, I fear, are hardly a good example for such a high-spirited girl as our dear Iris. We left Algiers for this *dreadful* place almost immediately after our arrival in the country; and here Iris has kept us ever since, much against my will, away from her comfortable home at Sidi Aia (which is really a delicious house), hunting up some mythical claims to her estate, set forward on behalf of a poor bare-footed pagan girl of the name of Meriem, or something of that sort. I won't write to you about this, however, at any length, as I understand dear Tom doesn't want the matter discussed in London. My real object in troubling you to-day is merely to ask you if you will be kind enough to do me a little favour. To add to my misfortune, as ill-luck will have it, I've managed in the last few days to get a bad attack of my old enemy bronchitis, which has come on severely since the snow began to fall thick on the upper mountains. I haven't had such a bad turn of it for years and years, and I'm writing this with a very blunt pencil (as you see) in bed, for the houses here are most ill-constructed, and it's quite impossible, with all one's pains,

to keep the draught out through these horrible windows. What I want to know, therefore, is, whether you'll be so good, like a dear boy, as to call at our house and ask Martha for my bronchitis kettle, and the inhaler, and spray-machine, and all the prescriptions and medical things in the lower right-hand drawer of the spare bedroom dressing-table. Please put them up in a neat parcel, and take them all (addressed to me) to Dr. Yate-Westbury's (I forget where he lives in St. John's Wood, but you can look his place up in the "Post Office Directory"). He's coming over to Algiers for the season next week, as Iris learns from the Sidi Aia people; and if you ask him, I've no doubt in the world he'll be glad to bring the things over for me, as he owns the next house to ours on the hill at Mustapha. Thanking you, by anticipation, for your kindness in this matter, and with best love, in which Iris (who's out at present) would no doubt join, believe me, my dear Harold,

'Ever your affectionate Aunt,

'AMELIA MARY KNYVETT.'

The perusal of this fond and foolish letter, as he loitered over the anchovy toast at breakfast, afforded Harold Knyvett in his own soul the keenest enjoyment. 'The Whitmarshes are all donkeys,' he thought internally, with the self-congratulatory smile of the very superior person; 'but Aunt Amelia's really the biggest donkey of the whole lot of them. The idea, now, of her blurting out like that the secret of what it is that's taken them all over to Algeria! And to me, too, of all people in the world! How mad that old ass her brother'd be if only he knew what a precious mess his affectionate sister's gone and made of it. "Doesn't want the matter discussed in London," indeed! The transparent idiot! I suspected as much when I heard he'd gone across with Iris to carry the war into Africa. So they've found out some young woman who claims to be Clarence Knyvett's heir and representative! Well, well, we may try that tack in the end, if all other plans fail, and my own little will miscarries anyhow. But it won't miscarry; it's as safe as houses—and a great deal safer, too, in these earthquake ages. For houses nowadays are no better than Three per Cents. I'd no idea my dear relations were away from

Algiers! What a stroke of luck! The house vacant! Long may the draughts blow up Aunt Amelia's chronic bronchitis! It's a splendid chance for me to get to Sidi Aia while they're all away from it, and discover my will stowed neatly away in the back drawer of that convenient davenport!

For Harold Knyvett, who left nothing to chance, had arranged beforehand the matter of the davenport.

He finished his coffee and lighted a cigarette; then he poised the letter contemplatively in one hand before him. Dr. Yate-Westbury! Ha, ha! An idea! In luck again! Aunt Amelia had unconsciously suggested, by a single phrase, the missing link in his grand scheme. One point alone was doubtful, and Aunt Amelia had cleared it up. He would bring that proud Iris to her knees at last! He would make her marry him or give up her property.

He stroked his chin, and smiled to himself. Dr. Yate-Westbury! The great authority upon nervous disease! He saw his way clear now to a voyage to Algiers. The man was an enthusiast for the Algerian climate. It was notorious that, having land to sell there, he regarded the place as an absolute panacea for all the ills that flesh is heir to, and especially for all forms of nervous disorder. A nervous disorder, then, was the one thing needful to secure a good plea for visiting Sidi Aia.

Harold Knyvett, to be sure, was in boisterous health. He had started in life with those two famous allies in the struggle for existence, 'a bad heart and a good digestion,' and he had never done anything yet to impair either of them. Leave from the Board of Trade, therefore, would be difficult to get on any other pretext; but a nervous disorder! there, the strongest-built and seemingly healthiest man may succumb any day to an unexpected malady. Fired with the idea, he rang the bell and ordered a hansom at once.

'To the London Library,' he cried aloud to the cabby, '12, St. James's Square; and look sharp, for I'm in a precious hurry.'

There was time before office-hours to look up the question. He reached the library, rushed upstairs, and took down from the shelf 'Yate-Westbury on Diseases on the Nervous System.' He would hocus the doctor out of his own treatise.

In ten minutes, he had chosen, digested, and assimilated his disease; he knew the symptoms of his particular malady as pat as Yate-Westbury himself could have told him them. A twitching of the fingers—yes, yes, just so; a nervous trembling about the corners of the mouth; loss of memory, decrease of appetite, frequent sleeplessness, accompanied by a growing tendency to dwell minutely upon long-past events in the night watches; incapacity to write down the exact word or phrase he wanted; forgetfulness of names, even with the nearest and dearest friends or acquaintances. He had swallowed the whole diagnosis entire before he rushed off in hot haste to the office; he was the victim of a slow and insidious decay; he needed rest, change of air, relaxation, variety.

At the door of his room at the Board of Trade he met his chief, with a vacuous smile on his carefully composed countenance.

‘Good morning, Mr.—er——,’ he said, and paused irresolute. Then, with a sudden air of frankness he drew his hand across his forehead, and added quickly, ‘My dear sir, you’ll hardly credit it, but I’ve actually managed to forget your name. I can’t think what’s coming over my poor head lately.’

‘I’ve noticed that before,’ his chief answered, with a good-natured laugh. ‘For a long time past, in fact, I’ve observed, Knyvett, that your memory hasn’t been by any means so brisk and keen as it used to be. You’ve seemed preoccupied and absorbed and moony and distracted. If I were you, do you know, my dear fellow, I’d not lose a day; I’d consult Yate-Westbury.’

Harold had hard work to repress a smile. Could anything on earth have happened more opportunely? It came in the very nick of time, as if he himself had carefully angled for it. No doubt, indeed, he had been preoccupied of late. When a man’s engaged in all his leisure moments with—ahem!—drawing up a will for a deceased person, he may well have but little attention left to spare for the dull and dry details of exports and imports!

‘You think so?’ he murmured, with well-assumed alarm. ‘I’m sorry for that. But I’ve felt it coming on, myself, for the last two months or so. My mind seems to have lost its

freshness and elasticity. It doesn't hook on to things as it used once to do. I'll take your advice. I'll consult Yate-Westbury this very evening.'

'Do,' his chief went on, with kindly considerateness. 'The service'll gain by it, in the end, no doubt. A fortnight's holiday'll be sure to set you right again. But I've noticed all along you were getting awfully fagged. Since the middle of the summer, indeed, to tell you the truth, you've never been half the sort of man you used to be.'

Harold bowed his head in affected regret.

'It's extremely kind of you to suggest it,' he said, with grateful warmth. 'I do want a change. I won't deny it. Those differential duties have run me too hard. But I'll see Yate-Westbury at once, Mr.—er—quite so—ah, Hamilton, thank you; and if he gives me a certificate to that effect, I'll run down South for a week or two's rest and change immediately.'

'Sensible fellow, Knyvett!' the chief reflected as he turned to his desk. 'Some fellows are too deuced proud to take your advice, and resent the slightest attempt to give them a hint for the good of their health. But Knyvett's always so sound and reasonable. I'm glad I persuaded him to go to Yate-Westbury.'

As soon as the day's work was fairly over, therefore, Harold, thus fortified by extraneous advice, went round without delay to the famous specialist's. He introduced himself as his uncle's nephew, and detailed his symptoms (straight out of the book) with the greatest minuteness. The famous specialist listened with deep attention, not unmixed with paternal pride and pleasure. A plainer case he had never come across. Typical, typical! And well might it be so, for Harold's symptoms were the picked result of years of experience and generalization, fired off point-blank in one long list at the innocent head of their observer or inventor.

'And so you don't sleep at nights, eh?' Dr. Yate-Westbury said, gazing through and through him, with an inquiring air. 'Well, well, that's bad. But usual, very. And, tell me now, what do you mostly think about when you're lying awake in these fits of sleeplessness?'

'Why,' Harold answered, playing nervously and ostenta-

tiously with his fingers on a button of his coat, while he endeavoured at the same time to make the corners of his mouth twitch and jerk as conspicuously as possible, 'nothing much, thank Heaven! I'm not troubled that way. I don't think of anything of the slightest importance. Merely minute old childish reminiscences, and all that sort of thing.'

The specialist smiled a grim smile of recognition—as, to be sure, he might, for the symptom confirmed his own diagnosis.

'And why do you pull about your button like that?' he asked, darting down upon him with sudden emphasis.

Harold glanced down, and pretended for the first moment to notice the movement.

'I—I don't know why,' he answered meekly. 'I wasn't aware I was pulling it about till you called my attention to it. Indeed, Dr.—er—er——' and he forgot the name with the most skilful innocence, 'I don't think I pull things about so usually.'

'Do you haggle over names much?' the specialist asked, with a knowing look. 'I noticed you forgot what mine was this moment.'

Harold hugged himself inwardly on the perfect way in which he was diddling his man with such a transparent fiction.

'A good deal of late,' he answered, his fingers rising up once more to the button, as if unconsciously. 'But it'll soon pass over,' he added, with pretended nervousness. 'It won't go on long. A mere passing ailment. I'll be all right again in a week or two, I fancy.'

'Look here, Mr. Knyvett,' the doctor said seriously. 'I won't conceal from you the painful fact that your case is a dangerous one—a distinctly dangerous one. We must be very careful. We must face these facts. You know what this sort of thing generally leads to?' He lowered his voice and almost whispered in his ear, 'Insanity, my dear sir—simple insanity.'

Harold assumed a profoundly-horrified air. He was a good actor, and had the muscles of his face well under control.

'You don't mean to say so!' he cried, in apparent alarm. 'Oh, don't say that, Dr.—er—er—Yate-Eastbury.'

Dr. Yate-Westbury closed his lips tight.

'There's only one thing for you to do,' he said, with emphatic severity. 'You must take a holiday—a complete holiday. No half-measures—a thorough change. I see by your eyes you've been over-exciting yourself too much about some business or other lately. You have the air of a man who has been profoundly absorbed by private affairs. A bachelor, you say; self-centred! self-centred! The root of all evil, if people would but see it. You need change of air, distraction, diversion, amusement. You should go abroad; Nice, shall we say? or Mentone? or Monte Carlo?' He paused for a second, and stroked his chin. 'Or, stay,' he went on, as if struck by an inspiration, 'why not Algiers? It's the very place for people who suffer from special symptoms. Air's sedative, soothing, and extremely bland. As it happens, in fact, I'm going there myself for the winter on Monday. You'd better come with me. In your present state of health, you need constant medical advice and attention. I've a villa on Mustapha, just next door to your uncle Sir Arthur's. Miss Knyvett's there now already, I believe, so you'll find yourself at once in the bosom of your family. A charming young lady; I met her out last season. We needn't say anything to her or others about our fears and suspicions for the future, of course——' here Dr. Yate-Westbury nodded and smiled with an air of profound professional mystery. 'Mum's the word there. I'll give you a certificate of a non-committing sort for the Board of Trade people; you know the line of country—overwork; nervous exhaustion; need of rest and change of scene; and you'll be ready to start with me from Charing Cross on Monday.'

Harold thanked his disinterested adviser with gloomy gratitude, and completed his arrangements with an internal chuckle. As he left the room, he didn't himself observe that his fingers were toying once more in a nervous way with that unfortunate button. If he had, indeed, he would only have reflected with a mental smile that he was simulating the symptoms even better than he intended. But Dr. Yate-Westbury noticed it with his keen glance, and remarked to his assistant, as Harold disappeared towards the front-door:

'Remarkable case, Prendergast. We must keep our eye

upon him. Premonitory signs of acute dementia; and what's more odd, the worst among them are not at all the ones he himself seems to think the most important!

CHAPTER XXXI.

STRICTLY PROFESSIONAL.

To Harold Knyvett the voyage to Algiers came as a welcome amusement. He really wanted to rest; he was glad to escape from London fog and London mud, after the intense strain of the last few months, to the olives, and mulberry-trees, and evergreens of the South. As the *train de luxe* from Paris rolled along in the early morning light down the wide Rhone Valley, past gardens still gay with roses and anemones, past cypress walls that guarded the tender vineyards from the cold blast of the icy mistral, past distant vistas of the snow-clad Alps, past fields where bronzed Provençal peasants toiled in the broad sunshine among luscious flowers, he was gratified at the success of his *ruse*, and delighted at the freshness and perennial beauty of the ever-glorious Mediterranean borderland. A certain indefinite exaltation of success filled all his heart. Things were going well with him. Fortune favoured. For he was on his way to Mustapha, to the very next house to Sir Arthur's villa, with the forged will buttoned safely up in his inner breast-pocket, and all in the most natural possible fashion. Even the suggestion to 'Try Algiers' had not come from within. His chief had recommended him to consult Yate-Westbury; and Yate-Westbury would be able to relate hereafter to his acquaintances the curious coincidence how this lucky young man in the Board of Trade had come to him for advice, quite by accident, about a nervous complaint—overwork and loss of memory; how he had urged him to visit the soothing climate of North Africa; and how the upshot of it all was the incidental discovery of the long-lost will, unearthed in some remote corner of Sir Arthur's villa—that will which restored the property to the rightful heir, and brought about at last the happy reunion of the Knyvett family.

For he meant to marry Iris in the long-run. The estate

itself was now to some extent a minor matter. He regarded it merely as a means to an end. And the end was to bring that proud girl to her knees: to compel her to marry him, willy-nilly.

He loved Iris. He *would* have Iris. No power in the world should keep him from Iris. The only girl on earth he had ever cared twopence about; the only girl on earth who was really worthy of him.

So he rolled along in high good-humour down to Marseilles, seeing success now well in view, and went with joy on board the *Ville de Naples*, which was to carry Harold Knyvett and all his fortunes—forged will included—to the golden shores of sunny Africa.

The sole drawback to his pleasure, indeed, was that intolerable old bore of a nervous specialist, who insisted upon treating him as a critical patient—half cracked, in short—and reading him sermons on the absolute need for distracting his mind from his own absorbing personality. Harold Knyvett didn't want his mind distracted just then. He was more than distracted enough already. It was a nuisance, when you preferred to admire the blue bay and the white Provençal hills receding in the distance, to be compelled to listen to that frantic old idiot's professional drivel, and to bear in mind spasmodically from time to time the necessity for keeping up somehow the most prominent symptoms. Not that the twitching of the fingers gave him much trouble by this time. Practice makes perfect. He was able to manage *that* part of the farce, thank goodness, without the slightest apparent effort. The state of nervous tension into which he had been thrown by the consciousness of holding the forged will concealed about his person, and by the momentous issues depending upon the success of his well-laid scheme, made a certain amount of uneasy fingering, indeed, perfectly natural to him. You can simulate nervousness readily enough when you really feel it; the difficulty would have been, in Harold's condition, to simulate the calm of uneventful existence.

'What you have most to guard against,' Dr. Yate-Westbury remarked once in a confidential undertone, as they paced the deck together, cigar in mouth, 'is too exclusive a concentration of mind and thought upon your

own personality and your own interests. You live too much in yourself, my dear sir ; that's what's the matter with you. Your brain's wrapped up in private schemes and designs and ideas ; I can see them whirling and circling in your head. You ought to be married, and enlarge your sphere ; a wife and children would drive all that sort of thing promptly out of you.'

Harold laughed in his sleeve to think how curiously the mad-doctor had put his finger by accident upon the very point. *Rem acu tetigit.* His mind was indeed wrapped up in private schemes and designs and ideas. He stroked his breast-pocket stealthily with his hand outside. It was safe, quite safe, that precious document ! He could feel it rustle under the coat as he pressed. His private schemes and designs and ideas, indeed ! Ah, yes, but they all led on by a direct route to that very marriage which the doctor counselled. A wife and children ! Ho, ho ! the humour of it ! Well—a wife, if you like ; a wife's all right enough ; but as for the children, why, Harold was strongly inclined to say about them, 'Le Roy s'avisera.' He didn't want a parcel of noisy brats running about the place—the mansion of his fancy. All he wanted was a peaceful interchange of ideas in spacious grounds with such a girl as Iris—a pleasant companion laid on, as it were, like the gas, and the water, and the electric bells, and ready at any moment to amuse and divert him with her chatty conversation and her tender playfulness.

'The great error of the nervous constitution,' the specialist went on, puffing away reflectively at one of Harold's very best *Fortuna di Cubas*, 'is, not to put too fine a point upon it, selfishness. My system of cure consists entirely in such a course of rational treatment as will succeed in taking the patient fairly out of himself. The narrow circle of one's own interests leads at last to nervous disintegration. People should avoid being too self-centred. That way, as Shakespeare says, madness lies. One's got strenuously to fight against it, or else to succumb to it. Have you read my book on Mental Disease ? You know the theory I there lay down on the origin of insanity ?'

The subject was intensely distasteful just then to Harold.

'No, I haven't,' he answered, with some asperity. 'I avoid all books on the brain, on principle.'

'Well, my theory is,' Yate-Westbury went on with professional zeal, disregarding his tone, 'that insanity's not a malady of the intellect at all, as most people imagine: it's a malady of the social and moral nature. A man who lives a healthy, varied, natural life—who mixes freely with his fellow-men—who troubles himself much about their welfare and their happiness—who reads and thinks and works and plays—who vividly represents to himself the feelings and wishes and ideas of others—such a man as that, now, never goes mad. He has no temptation. His surroundings are too sane and his interests too numerous. A family, friends, public duties, society—all those are safeguards against the insane tendency. Literature, science, art, politics—the wider your world, the less your chance of nervous derangement. But the fellow who lives a purely selfish, concentrated life—the bachelor who takes his ease all day long at his club—the man of means who finds society and family ties a bore, whose social instincts are inefficiently awakened, whose public spirit is dormant or non-existent—those are the people, if you look around, who go mad easily. They take to hobbies, or else to monomanias. Some pet design, or some favourite scheme, most often purely personal, absorbs their energies. If it succeeds, they go mad with delight; if it fails, they go mad, *per contra*, with disappointment.'

Harold's fingers toyed unconsciously with the top button of his tweed tourist suit. The precious paper rustled melodiously underneath. The sound was like muffled music in his ears.

'You think so?' he said, half stifling a yawn. 'You think insanity depends upon self-concentration?'

'Think so!' Yate-Westbury echoed, with a touch of contempt in the intonation of his voice. 'Think so! My dear sir, I don't think so; I know it. I've studied the question. The proof's just this. You must have met madmen over and over again in asylums——'

'I don't visit asylums,' Harold interposed drily.

'Still, you must have met madmen, anyhow,' the doctor went on, warming up to his subject, 'who thought they were rich, who thought they were poor, who thought they

were Napoleon, who thought they were the rightful heirs to the Crown, who thought they were the authors of "Paradise Lost," who thought they were persecuted by wicked relations, who thought they were the Czar or the Prophet Mahommed. But you never met a madman anywhere who thought *somebody else* had come into a fortune, *somebody else* was the Khan of Tartary, *somebody else* was followed and annoyed, *somebody else* was the ill-used inheritor of the Throne of England. Self, self, self, self. All insane people have but one cry: *I am this, I am that, I am the other. It's I, I, I, whatever they say.* They forget their children, their wives, their friends, their enemies; but they never for a single moment forget their own delusion, or their own pet grievance.'

Harold moved away restlessly, with a moody air, towards the side of the ship. This talk annoyed him. He didn't want to be bored by abstract discussions about the habits and manners and natural history of the insane, when he was going to Algiers to prove his title to a splendid estate, and to compel his cousin Iris to marry him! He was full of himself, and resented boredom. A man can't be worried with rubbish like that while all his soul brims over, seething with one great design, on whose success or failure he has staked his whole future fate and happiness. One picture alone now usurped his brain and monopolized consciousness—the picture of himself, rummaging drawers at the villa at Sidi Aia, and engaged in discovering Sir Arthur's will—the forged one, of course; but that was a detail—in some hidden corner of his uncle's *escritoire*.

And then to be obliged to listen respectfully to that old image droning, droning, droning on—'The great thing to avoid is intense preoccupation with one's own affairs; too profound an entanglement in any private or personal piece of business. To people of the selfish or self-centred type, such preoccupation is frequently next door to fatal. It drives them at last by slow degrees into acute dementia.'

Good heavens! Would the man never cease his chatter? Gabble, gabble, gabble, the whole day long! And Sir Arthur's will nestling all the time in his safe breast-pocket! Preoccupation, indeed! Who could help being preoccupied? Sir Arthur's fortune, and Iris Knyvett!

CHAPTER XXXII.

'AUX ARMES, CITOYENS!'

UP in the mountains, meanwhile, strange things were taking place among those idyllic Kabyles. But neither Le Marchant nor Blake nor Meriem knew as yet anything about them.

It was a chilly evening of Algerian winter.

The naturalist was sitting at home, somewhat shivering in the tent, trying on a complete new suit of woollen Kabyle costume which he had bought as a curiosity at a neighbouring market to take home to England. Vernon Blake was dining out by special invitation at the Fort, where Iris and he were conversing unreprieved with much animation under Uncle Tom's very nose—so unsuspecting is age when once its views are firmly hardened. And Meriem was seated on the hard mud floor in her own room at the Amine's cottage, thinking in her poor lonely soul how much better it would have been for her if those two flaring meteors of Englishmen had never darted with their disturbing influence across her peaceful, old-fashioned Kabyle horizon.

But on the hillside without a very different scene might have presented itself to her eyes, had she happened to look forth towards the village platform from her narrow mud window. For there, under the open sky, and in the broad moonlight, the men of the Beni-Merzoug were assembled together in the ancient fashion under all arms, and in their midst the eldest of the marabouts stood erect, with flashing eyes, and stretched his bare arms heavenwards in awful prayer before the eager eyes of the whole assembly.

'Hush!' the Amine cried, with a commanding voice, as the marabout beckoned with one hand for silence. 'The servant of Allah will speak over the chosen youths—the youths who go forth, like their fathers of old, for the defence of their fatherland against the infidel and the oppressor.'

A great stillness fell at his words upon the entire meeting. The buzz and hum of voices ceased at once to thrill, and the men dropped down at the signal on their bended knees before the glowing face of the inspired marabout. Incense

rose in fumes from a brazier in the midst—the poisonous, intoxicating incense of haschisch.

The marabout spread out both arms slowly over their heads. ‘The blessing of Allah,’ he cried aloud, ‘of Allah, the All-wise, the All-merciful, be with you.’

‘So be it,’ the young men responded solemnly.

‘Friends,’ the marabout began, once more, as they knelt and bent their heads, in a serried body, ‘you know well the crisis, and the custom of the Kabyles. It was the way of our fathers, when hordes like locusts invaded their land, to call upon the chosen youngmen of the tribes to band themselves together by solemn oath into a sacred legion. The more forlorn the hope, the greater their courage; for the sons of the Kabyles shrink not from self-sacrifice. It is your duty, too, in like manner, to sacrifice your lives to-day for your country. To that end we have proclaimed a Sacred War, when Islam shall rise in all its might against the power of the Infidel. In such a war there is no going back. It is as when the lion rushes upon the spears. You will take the oath before the face of Allah. The prayers of the dead shall be read over you all, for you go to your death, and you come not back, except upon trestles, or else with victory. Those who die in this conflict shall be buried apart, in the cemetery of the saints, in the field of glory; and each man among them, dying for the Faith, shall be reckoned as a saint and counted a Sidi. Prayers shall be offered for ever at his tomb, and the blessing of Allah shall rest upon it always. But if any of you escape with loss of honour from the field, his corpse shall rot like a camel’s in the desert. He, and all his kindred, shall be held for ever in utter contempt by all the Faithful as dogs and outcasts.’

The young men bowed their foreheads to the ground with one accord, and with military precision. ‘We accept,’ they answered, ‘we go, for Allah!’ and with their faces turned one way towards Mecca, they prayed silently for a few minutes.

‘You swear,’ the marabout said again, as they rose from the ground, holding out in his hand a roll of the Koran, ‘you swear by this sacred book, which came from Mecca, and by the holy tomb of our Lord of Kerouan, the companion of the Prophet, to wage a Jihad to the death against all

infidels, and never to return from the field of battle save dead or victorious.'

'We swear,' the young men answered solemnly, with uplifted hands.

'Let a Taleb come forward,' the marabout said, stretching his bare arms once more heavenward.

Hadji Daood ben Marabet staggered slowly forward, and took the roll from the marabout's hands in his trembling fingers. Unfolding it spasmodically, and with due deliberation, the toothless old man came at last in his search to the fourteenth chapter, which enjoins on the Faithful the duty of exterminating the infidels everywhere. Bending over the book, he read those terrible lines aloud in their sonorous Arabic, with that peculiar droning, sing-song voice which lends so much mystery and solemnity of tone to Mahomedan ceremonial. His words thrilled them. Every curse told home separately. The men, it was clear, were deeply stirred. They clasped their short Kabyle knives with desperate resolution in their trembling fingers, and waited impatiently for the signal to march upon their deadly errand.

The voice of the reader wavered at last upon the awful closing sentence, 'Neither man nor woman, lord nor servant, old age nor infancy: spare none, but slay; spill their blood on the ground; let the infidels perish utterly from the earth, saith Allah.'

A deep murmur of 'Amens' ran like a shudder through that heaving crowd. Hadji Daood sank back, exhausted, into the ring. Then the marabout stepped forth once more, with his wild locks tossed shaggily over his bronzed forehead, and in a loud voice, with foaming mouth, began to recite in solemn tones the prayers for the dead over the chosen youths, pointing with his finger to their bodies while he spoke, as though each of them lay already on his bier in an open grave spread out before him.

The effect was electric, overwhelming, irresistible. The old men, standing round, sobbed aloud over the heads of their doomed sons. The young men, kneeling in front, felt the tears trickle slowly down their hot cheeks. The marabout himself faltered once or twice with a choking voice, and then went on again, sustained, as it seemed, in

his holy task by some direct inspiration of his bloodthirsty deity. His features were deadly pale and convulsed, and his limbs were working as though drawn by wires. At the close of the prayers, all rose once more in their long white robes, and the marabout cried aloud, in a more martial tone, 'You have heard your duty! Go now and perform it! The Beni-Yenni and the Aith Menguellath are marching on St. Cloud. March you, too, direct, and surprise the infidels in their beds as they sleep. Slay, slay, slay—men, women and children. Let not one single Christian escape with his life. French, English, or Spaniard, slay all alike; but above all, slay *her*, the enemy of your race, the high-heeled woman! Avenge on her, and on all beneath her roof, the bones of the blessed Sheikh el-Haddad the Blacksmith! Avenge on her the bones of Si Mohammed Said with the Two Tombs, whose holy remains she cast out on the field to be defiled by dogs and vultures and jackals!'

With a loud unearthly shout, the whole vast body, seizing rifles and swords, put itself tumultuously and fiercely under way. Religious frenzy and the fumes from the brazier had driven the men mad. Their lips were blue; their eyes started from their sockets; great drops of sweat poured down their pale and haggard faces. 'Jehad! Jehad!' they cried, in a mad shriek for vengeance. 'Death to the infidel! To St. Cloud! To St. Cloud! Slay, slay, every man, every woman, every child of them!'

The musicians in front beat upon their drums, and twanged aloud their tortoise-shell lyres. The wild discordant music of the tomtoms and castanets seemed to intensify and inflame their fury. 'To St. Cloud!' the marabout shouted, at the top of his voice, in fierce tones, his hair now flying loose on the breeze behind, his eyes bloodshot, and his mouth foaming. He waved his bare arms wildly around him. 'Slay the high-heeled woman,' he shouted, 'and all her house, in honour of Allah and Mohammed his Prophet; and cast forth her body for dogs to eat, as Jehu of Israel cast forth the body of Jezebel, the idolatress, before the gates of Jezreel, and as Omar the Caliph cast forth the body of the accursed Roumi before the gates of Sidon.'

At the word, he dragged a goat from behind into their

midst. 'Taste blood!' he shrieked, and flung it towards them. With hideous shouts, the fanatics rushed, with hooked fingers, upon that symbolical victim, tore it limb from limb alive and bleeding, and fought with one another like wild beasts for the quivering morsels, more after the fashion of ravenous wolves than of human beings. Their faces and hands reeked with blood. 'Now, on to St. Cloud!' the marabout yelled out, tearing a live snake and devouring it before their eyes.

'Jehad! Jehad!' the crowd shouted aloud, in response, with savage tumult. 'Slay, slay! the voice of Allah proclaims it! A Holy War! Death, death to the infidels!' And, drunk with blood and haschisch, they dashed madly onward.

Meriem in her own room, sitting still on the floor, heard with surprise the tramp of feet and the mingled noise of many voices, and rushed to her window, breathless, to learn the meaning of it. As she did so, she just caught the last echoes of those shrill cries, 'Jehad! Jehad! Slay the high-heeled woman and all her house! A Holy War! Death, death to the infidels!'

In a moment her reeling brain took it all in. She guessed what it meant. She understood instinctively. Her quick wit realized the truth at once in all its hideous implications. They were going to St. Cloud to murder the Europeans! And amongst them they would murder Iris and Vernon!

At the sound, Islam died out within her.

For to Meriem a Jehad was no idle word. She had heard awful tales on the village platform, many a summer evening, of the great uprising of 1870. She had heard from the mouths of the actors themselves how the religious fanatics of that troublous time had massacred, in hot blood, the entire population of Palaestro; had carried off into slavery the women and children of the European villages scattered throughout Kabylie; had burnt to the ground every farmhouse, church, and oil-mill in the mountains; had besieged Bougie and invested Djidjelly; had spread fire and slaughter far and wide through the land, from the valley at Tizi-Ouzou to the eagle's nest of French soldiers perched on the precipitous heights of Fort National. She knew that when the

fierce and fiery Kabyle blood is up, neither childing mother nor speechless babe will be spared from the slaughter by their indiscriminate fury. She knew that her countrymen would fall upon St. Cloud like wolves upon a sheepfold, and rend Iris and Vernon to pieces like vultures in their fanatic madness.

A Holy War! A campaign against the infidels! Vernon and Iris—her dearest on earth! In that decisive moment the faith of her childhood went down like water before her instinctive feelings. At all hazards, she must save the lives of the Christians!

There was but one thing to do: to make at once, with all speed, for the valley of Tizi-Ouzou. It was too late now to warn the garrison at St. Cloud. She saw her countrymen were well on the road to the fort, already, and she could never hope to pass them by undetected, even if her feet were fleet enough and strong enough to overtake them and outrun them. But the garrison, though surprised, might hold out till morning. She had heard of the iron wires that carry news with lightning speed for the infidel—of the iron-horse that drags his carriages like clouds before the sirocco. If she could but reach Tizi-Ouzou and warn the French there to telegraph to Algiers, help might yet arrive in time to save them. To save Iris: to save Vernon! The Kabyle within her was forgotten altogether in her burning desire to protect from death those two she had learned to love so dearly. Traitor as she might be to her own people, she had but one thought—to save Iris and Vernon!

She lifted the latch of the rude door, and stole out unperceived to the entrance of the tent, where Eustace stood within, in the Kabyle dress he had just been trying on, and which transformed him at once into a perfect native. Meriem started to see him, but had no time for comments. 'Eustace,' she cried in haste, snatching up a flask that lay upon the box, 'they've made a Jihad—a sacred war. My people have risen. It's death to the infidels. They're marching on to St. Cloud to kill the Christians. The whole village together has turned out in arms. I saw them myself—the marabout at their head! They mean to kill every soul in the Fort! What can we do—to save Iris and Vernon?'

In her startled face Eustace read the whole truth instinctively at once. He knew the impetuous Moslem nature too well to doubt that Meriem was right in her strange story. 'We must go on and warn them,' he cried in answer hurriedly.

'Too late!' Meriem sobbed out. 'No chance for that! They're on the road already. Our people have started. I saw them go. There's no other way down. We could never get past them.'

'Can they telegraph to Tizi-Ouzou?' Eustace asked in haste. 'If reinforcements could come, they might hold out for a day or so.'

Meriem shook her head despondently. 'My people would be sure to cut the wire,' she answered, in agony. 'They know all that. It crosses the path. Even I, who am only a girl, had heard of it.'

'Then there's nothing for it but to tramp to Tizi-Ouzou,' Eustace answered at once, with prompt decision. 'Our only hope lies in rousing the authorities there; they might telegraph on for help to Algiers and Fort National. Come on, Meriem. There's not a moment to lose. Come with me, and tell them when you get there what you've seen. We might ride, perhaps. There are mules outside. Let's seize them, and run down at once to Tizi-Ouzou.'

So, quick as thought, going forth from the tent, in his Kabyle dress unchanged as he stood (it was safer so), he caught the first two mules he could find in the field, and slipping on a bridle in breathless haste, mounted one of them himself to descend the mountain. Meriem, without one word, held and mounted the other. And in such strange guise did those two set off through the moonlight alone, to rouse the unconscious settlers of Tizi-Ouzou to a sense of the danger that threatened the colony.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

AMONG THE SNOWS.

THEY had gone but a few hundred yards down the path, riding single file on the narrow Kabyle road, which cactus and aloe obstructed on either side, when suddenly Meriem,

who went first, was brought to a halt by the sharp and short report of a pistol, fired full in the face of her borrowed mount. C'r'r'r, it whizzed past the mule's very nose. The animal reared upright with terror on its haunches for a moment, and Meriem, looking ahead towards the darkling bushes in front, called out in Kabyle tremulously, but in very clear tones: 'Who's there? Why fire at us?'

As she spoke, two men crept cautiously out from the shadow of the lentisk scrub, and one of them answered in a sulky voice, in the same tongue which Eustace could now just vaguely follow: 'Who are you, and where are you off to to-night, the wrong way down, when the sons of the Kabyles are marching in a mass against the homes of the infidel?'

The men were not of her own tribe, Meriem knew at once, by their peculiar dialect. They were Beni-Yenni, from the village beyond the Fort, posted there, no doubt by arrangement, to guard the pass down to Tizi-Ouzou against retreating Christians. There must be dozens more of them picketed lower down the road. To proceed that way would be clearly useless. Retreat was impossible, so Meriem temporized. 'I'm a woman,' she said—'a true believer—and I was going to the chief of the Beni-Yenni, with letters and messages from the Amine of the Beni-Merzoug.'

The stranger, advancing, seized the bridle of her mule with a suspicious glance.

'And your husband?' he cried, with a scowl at Le Marchant. 'Why is he, a man of military age, skulking from the Holy War at such a moment?'

'My husband,' Meriem answered with trembling lips, hoping in her heart Eustace would have the sense not to break into words and betray himself for a Christian, 'is a deaf and dumb man. He's useless as a soldier. So my uncle, the Amine, has sent him to take care of me.'

'It's a lie!' the Kabyle answered, wrenching the mule aside suddenly, and gazing straight into Eustace's eyes. 'Fire, Mohanuned, fire! These are traitors—infidels! I know the man's face. They're going down to Tizi-Ouzou to warn the garrison.'

Meriem's heart leapt up into her mouth at this unexpected emergency.

'Leave your mule and run, Meriem,' Eustace cried, in English, jumping as he spoke from his own beast, and seizing her tremulous hand hard in his. Next moment a bullet whizzed hissing past his ears, and a short Kabyle knife gleamed white and bright in the clear moonlight.

The Englishman seized his assailant in his stout arms, and, grasping him round the waist, with one violent effort flung him from him heavily upon the path behind. Then, unarmed as they were—for Eustace hadn't even waited to hunt up his revolver in the hurry of the moment—they turned and fled headlong into the thick lentisk scrub, and down the steep gully of broken hillside towards the brook at the bottom. Delay was dangerous with so many unseen enemies about. The stones under foot slipped as they went, for the slope was rubbly, and Eustace tore his hands more than once in clutching at the bushes to save Meriem from too hasty and abrupt a descent; but Meriem, all barefooted as she was, leaped lightly down unhurt, like some mountain antelope, and planted her sole firmly at last on the soft mould in the centre of the gully.

'What can we do now?' she whispered low, as shots were heard again whizzing over their heads from the rocks above, the Kabyles firing at random in the direction they had taken. 'There's no getting down to Tizi-Ouzou at this rate, and no other road except back by the Fort to St. Cloud, and so on to Fort National.'

Eustace made his mind up without a moment's hesitation.

'We've only one thing left to do,' he answered boldly. 'The passes are held on either side. We must go over the mountains, right across the Col, and descend upon the Constantine railway in the valley. At Bouira, or the first other station we reach, they could telegraph for aid to Algiers and Philippeville.'

Meriem shuddered. It seemed impossible.

'Upon the Constantine railway!' she cried, in a low voice, half terrified. 'Over the high mountains! No other way left! We must trudge through the snow, then!'

And she gazed down ruthfully at her poor bare feet, ill-fitted, indeed, for such a walk as that was.

'There's nothing else possible,' Le Marchant answered, following her eyes with his own as they looked downward

timidly—‘for me, at least. I must go to Bouira. But Meriem, why need you accompany me? Couldn’t you steal back unperceived to the village? The walk’s too long and too hard by far for you, my child.’

‘Never,’ Meriem answered, with profound conviction. ‘Never, while Iris and Vernon are in danger. I’ll walk my feet bare to the bone before I desert them, Eustace. We’ll rouse all Algeria rather than let them be murdered in cold blood at St. Cloud, if we have to trudge through miles of snow to do it.’

Le Marchant saw that she meant what she said, and he made no attempt to turn her from her purpose. He admired it too much to wish to interfere with it.

‘Come on, then,’ he said, looking her full in the face. ‘We must start at once. Not a moment to lose. Up these first heights here will lead us to a point where we can see the Djurjura. Once we catch sight of the snowy peaks in this bright moonlight, we can find our way well. We must walk all night; but by early morning, with good luck, we may reach Bouira.’

Not another word was spoken. They turned at once to set out toilsomely on that difficult and dangerous mountain journey. Between them and the main central valley of the Atlas, down whose midst the grand trunk-line of Algeria, from Oran to Constantine, winds by long gradients its tortuous way, lay the huge white snow-covered mass of the Djurjura. Only two passes threaded the lateral ranges on either side from Beni-Merzoug: one of them led back to Tizi-Ouzou, and was held in force by the Beni-Yenni mountaineers: the other led forward to the Fort at St. Cloud, and was the one down which the Beni-Merzoug themselves had marched to massacre the isolated little garrison. How far the insurrection might spread on either side, Le Marchant had not the faintest conception; but he hoped by reaching civilization once more on the line of the railway route he might still be in time to avert the menaced massacre at that doomed outpost. To do so, however, no plan was possible save the desperate one of crossing the snowy ridge between the sister peaks of Tamgout and Lalla Khadidja. They had to make their way alone, at dead of night, through trackless wilds, and over untrodden snow, in

a country the greater part of which was absolutely unknown to either one of them. But it was the sole remaining chance for saving the lives of their friends at St. Cloud; and they faced it together, bravely and silently.

The hillside above the gorge was steep and rocky, but they mounted it, step by step, in dead silence, creeping up under the shadows of the wild olive-bushes and the low genista scrub, for fear of attracting the attention of the Kabyles opposite, as long, at least, as they remained within range of a rifle-shot. As they toiled on and up, under the moonlit sky, the air at each level they attained grew colder and colder. Olives slowly gave way to pine and cedar; cedars again ceased, in turn, in favour of low clumps of wind-swept juniper. Meriem drew her thin white robe closer and closer around her. She was chilled by the freezing wind, and her teeth chattered.

'Here,' Le Marchant cried, pulling off his own upper cloak—the outer Kabyle garment—'you must wrap this about your shoulders, my child; it's better than nothing.'

'No, no,' Meriem answered, holding her haik tight in her numbed fingers, and shaking her head; 'keep it yourself; you need it more than I do. We Kabyles are accustomed to winter cold. We go about barefoot, even when the snow lies deep and thick on our own mountains.'

Le Marchant wrapped it round her, in spite of her remonstrances, with an imperious gesture.

'You must take it,' he said. 'You're the less warmly clad by far of the two. Thank heaven, I've a thick English jersey, unchanged, under my bernouse. Besides, what we want is for both to pull through. We musn't let either fail on the summit.'

They walked on quickly over the intervening ground, mile after mile, up, up—up ever, till they reached the snow-line on the high Col between the two rearing moonlit mountains. At its edge, Le Marchant sat down on a great ice-worn boulder, and began pulling off his boots very quietly.

'What are you doing?' Meriem asked, repressing a shiver.

'Taking my boots off,' Le Marchant answered, as if for a gentleman to be so employed were the most natural proceeding in the world.

'So I see,' Meriem replied. 'But what for?'

She knew already; but until he told her, natural politeness suggested it would be rude to anticipate.

'You must put them on,' Le Marchant answered firmly, handing them over to her. 'You can't go and tramp through the snow barefoot. They'll be a deal too big for you, but they're better than nothing. I have my stockings. We shall both be protected against the worst of the cold to some extent.'

Meriem shook her head.

'No, no,' she said cagerly; 'I can never wear them. I'm accustomed to go barefoot often in the snow. You're not. My soles are hardened to it. Besides, they'd slip off my poor little feet like anything.'

Le Marchant made no verbal reply, but taking out the handkerchief concealed in his bosom, he tore it in two, and bound each half tight round Meriem's insteps. Meriem, looking on in wonder, allowed him to do it. Next, he gathered on the hillside a few handfuls of the dry Algerian club-moss, as soft as tow, and twining it close around the two rags of handkerchief, thrust her feet, thus bound, into his own boots, which he proceeded to lace up in solemn silence, in spite of Meriem's protests and exclamations. 'I can fill up my socks with moss,' he went on quietly, 'and that'll keep the warmth of my feet from melting the snow. It's freezing to-night. The surface'll all be hard and firm. If you can hold out, I can hold out, Meriem.'

Meriem's eyes were dim with tears.

'If you make me take them, I can go on all night, Eustace,' she said simply. And she took his hand in hers with a friendly pressure.

The Englishman's eyes moistened also, but he said nothing. He stuffed his socks with the soft moss, and, lifting her by the hand, raised her gently from the ground, in the unaccustomed foot-gear. They walked on through the snow, thus equipped, for a few hundred yards. Then Meriem sat down on the crisp, hard snow.

'Take them off, Eustace,' she said faintly. 'I can walk better without them. They seem to clog my feet so much. I'm not accustomed to these great hard things. I'd a thousand times rather you yourself wore them.'

Le Marchant saw she really meant it; the unusual weight impeded her free and graceful movements; so he sat down by her side and unlaced the clumsy things without a word.

'We can exchange,' he said, as soon as he had finished. 'I'll take the boots, and you the stockings.'

'Oh, no!' Meriem cried. 'Never mind about me. I'm used to cold. It doesn't matter. If we go on walking, it won't hurt me. But you English are more delicately brought up than we are.'

'In a crisis,' Eustace answered, with prompt decision, 'one man must be dictator and order about the others. Don't answer me back. Do as you're bid, Meriem. The lives of the people at St. Cloud depend upon it.'

Meriem knew in her heart he spoke the truth.

They made the exchange in silence, and then marched on across the deep, soft snow. The socks kept Meriem's feet warm; a nest of club-moss sufficed for Eustace. The snow lay flaky and powdery, as it often lies on mountain-heights; and the slight Col between the peaks that they were endeavouring to surmount rose still many hundred feet above them. In places the drifts covered with their deceptively even sheet great hollows and bowls in the underlying surface; in places their feet struck sharp rocks or jagged ends of ledges an inch or so below the treacherous and glistening level. As long as the moon shone, however, all still went well; but in the very jaws of the gap between the two twin mountains, thin clouds began to drive up slowly from south-westward—an ominous quarter—and flakes to fall here and there in their faces as they went, at long intervals. Gradually the flakes followed faster and faster; and just as they reached the summit level of the Col, a perfect storm of snow, in blinding masses, beat fiercely against them. Meriem was weary now with much tramping through the drifts, and ill-clad still in her light and simple Kabyle garments. She drew her haik tighter and tighter yet around her, and battled bravely against the cutting blast that drove wildly in her face; but her lips were blue and her teeth chattered, and Eustace began to fear in his soul she would never get through to descend upon the warmer side of the valley towards Bouira.

At last, as the storm drove fiercer in their faces, she sat down exhausted in the soft snow.

‘Leave me, Eustace,’ she said, in a weary voice, like a child that can hardly keep its eyes open. ‘I can go no further. For Vernon’s sake and Iris’s, go on without me.’

To sit down, wearied out, in the snow to rest, is to freeze to death. Le Marchant’s heart almost failed him at the thought. If Meriem was sinking, Meriem was doomed. They could do nothing but sit down there and die together.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CIVILIZED SOCIETY.

IN the Fort at St. Cloud, Madame l’Administratrice had gathered around her hospitable board for the moment a party which might almost have enabled her to forget Paris. The little woman, indeed, was in high spirits. And not without reason. On her right hand sat an eminent dignitary of her Church, on a pastoral tour through his extensive diocese. On her left sat that distinguished light of the British Bar, Mr. Thomas Kynnersley Whitmarsh, Q.C., pouring forth French small-talk, in his usual glib fashion, with perfect fluency and most imperfect grammar. The officer of the Génie, ablaze with medals, had taken in the wife of the neighbouring Commandant—the lady whose husband had married her out of pure depravity; and the neighbouring Commandant had returned the compliment by offering his one remaining arm to the plain and somewhat faded sister of the officer of the Génie. Iris and Vernon Blake, thus linked by malice prepense of madame’s, sat opposite the last couple at their good friend’s board; and Mrs. Knyvett herself, in the place of honour, forgetful for the night of her bronchial troubles, consoled that amiable cypher, M. l’Administrateur, with congenial conversation in scrappy fragments, jerked out at intervals with the purest boarding-school Parisian accent.

The dinner itself was a monumental triumph of Franco-African *cuisine*. Nothing like it had ever been attempted in Kabylie. The soup would have done honour to Véfour or

Bignon; the fish was fresh-caught grayling from the snow-fed mountain-streams of the greater Djurjura; no suspicion of garlic disgraced the sweetbreads; no faint reminiscence of hircine flavour raised doubts (too familiar to the mind of the Algerian *bon-vivant*) as to the possible substitution of kid for lamb in the succulent *rôti*. The burgundy had blushed on the sunny Côte d'Or, no imitative colonial brand from the slopes of Atlas; the olives had ripened on Provençal hills, and been bottled in oil and stuffed with anchovy by the cunning hands of Maille of Paris. Madame l'Administratrice herself beamed with joy and with *crème de Ninon*. Monseigneur had deigned to compliment her on her *beignets à la reine*; and monseigneur was well known to recoup himself for his Lenten fast in due season by making the best of the good things of this world when the Church permitted such occasional relaxation.

'And who would say we were lost among the deepest recesses of the African mountains?' monseigneur observed reflectively with a faint sigh, plunging his fork as he spoke into his tenth *olive farcie*, and stroking with his left hand that long, flowing beard which the rules of the Church permit to add so much dignity to the dress and appearance of the missionary clergy. 'With madame's commissariat, and madame's flow of wit, a man of the world would judge himself in Paris.'

'For my own part,' Uncle Tom remarked, rolling a mouthful of burgundy on his palate with obvious approbation, 'I refuse to believe this is Africa at all. Our friends here have made us so perfectly comfortable, and so perfectly at home, that I shall be quite sorry, I declare, when the time comes for us to go back to the shelter of my dingy club in dear dirty old London.'

'And yet, *on y est très bien à Londres aussi*,' monseigneur went on, with an abstracted eye, his mind reverting dreamily to certain pleasant memories of English hothouse grapes, Highland grouse, and giant asparagus; 'it is only in England, *après tout*, that a connoisseur can taste the wine of Oporto in its full perfection. But, nevertheless, we are here in Africa—decidedly in Africa. I am strong on that point. I refuse to admit the contrary, monsieur. My diocese is the most genuine Africa of all—the original Africa of the

original Afri. And my flock—the Kabyles—for are not they, too, my flock?—are the people of Masinissa and Juba and Jugurtha.’

‘Don’t you think, monseigneur,’ Iris put in from the bottom of the table, in her very best French, though not without timidity, ‘there’s a great deal of Vandal blood left to this day among the Kabyles as well? I notice so many of them have blue eyes and fair hair—some of the children have even light blonde complexions. That must surely be quite Teutonic. Belisarius can hardly have exterminated the northern invaders, even if he broke down the power of Gilimer and his fellow-countrymen.’

Vernon Blake opened his eyes wide in speechless admiration at the intrepidity of the young lady who could thus venture to approach a bearded French prelate with historical criticisms in his own language; while even monseigneur himself, who had never before met an English learned lady of the new school, raised his eyebrows by degrees in mild surprise at such an unexpected interpellation on such a matter. But the old priest was too polished a gentleman to show his astonishment overtly in words; he merely answered, with a deferential bow: ‘Mademoiselle is doubtless quite right in principle; such fair hair and eyes may frequently betray a Teutonic origin. Genseric may, perhaps, have borne his share in the total. But what I maintain, especially, is that my flock as a whole—for I consider them mine, though most of them, unfortunately, still remain in error—are the genuine old Romanized provincials of Africa, the historical Christians of African antiquity, the descendants of the race which gave to the Church Tertullian, and Cyprian, and Augustine of Hippo.’

‘They are certainly most European in face and feature,’ Iris answered, with that effort which English people always feel in speaking a foreign language. ‘If one dressed them differently, in European dress, one could hardly distinguish them, I think, from Italians or Spaniards.’

‘And even their costume itself, which seems to us so foreign,’ Vernon Blake ventured to remark, but in his own tongue (for he had got here on ground that he really knew); ‘why, it’s almost precisely the old Greek dress, as one gets it in the torsos. You can see in the sculptures from the

Parthenon at the British Museum exactly the same arrangements of folds and drapery as those of the Kabyle women. The peculiar straight lines of the robe as it falls to the ground are absolutely identical. You get them again, you know, in Flaxman's drawings. The fact is, it's just the Greek dress, the old universal dress of simple nations, surviving in Africa.'

Monseigneur bowed with an expression of the intensest interest and appreciation. As a matter of fact, like so many of his countrymen, he understood not a single word of any living language except his mother-tongue.

'But to revert to what mademoiselle was just observing,' he interposed placidly, with a dexterous shift of his eyes from the painter to Iris; 'I should be inclined to say my Kabyles here are merely a remnant of the old common Mediterranean population, essentially similar to that of Greece and Italy and Spain and the Islands. They're Berbers still, and still unaltered. *Selon moi*, mademoiselle, invasions never very greatly alter the underlying character of a population. France is still Gaul, in spite of everything. The *esprit Gaulois* is with us yet. It is the same in Africa. The Carthaginians, the Romans, the Vandals, the Byzantines, the Saracens, and the Arabs have all conquered the old Berber coast in turn; but the Kabyles are to-day, in spite of that, as Berber as ever. From their mountain eyries they have looked down unhurt upon the dwellers in the plain under a dozen dynasties. Islam itself has made no real structural change in their social relations. In their savage Switzerland these free tribes are monogamist still; they are domestic still; their women wear no veils, and are cooped in no harems; the open old Greek and Roman life exists among these peaceful and idyllic mountaineers as fully as ever. And therefore,' monseigneur went on, warming up with enthusiasm and forgetting his olive, 'I look forward with confidence, I look forward with hope, to the time when the Kabyles shall once more be gathered as a body into the fold of the Church; when an African cathedral of worthy architecture shall rise anew above the ruins of Metropolitan Carthage; when a new Augustine shall adorn our Hippo; when a new Monica shall grace our re-risen Rusgunia; when a new Synesius will go forth from our

Cyrene to evangelize the black races of interior Africa. The Arab, believe me, will retire abashed to his native deserts; the Kabyle will return a willing convert to the fold of Christendom.'

Monseigneur paused for breath one second in that oft-repeated peroration, delivered, after his wont, with folded palms, and with something of his noted ecclesiastical unction. But the pause was fatal to his chance of the house's attention. Madame l'Administratrice, leaning forward impatiently for an opportunity to interrupt his even flow, cut in at the break with her flippant criticism.

'*Quant à moi, monseigneur,*' she said, with a slight toss of her well-dressed *coiffure*, 'I perceive none of these differences you so eloquently point out between *indigène* and *indigène*. After the monkey, the animal that most nearly approaches man is no doubt the Kabyle. But for *me*, a pig of a native is always still a pig of a native. The Kabyles may be as Greek and as Christian as you make out, but why, in the name of a saint, I ask you, do they come around at night to steal my spring chickens, and then offer them calmly, plucked and drawn, next morning, for three francs a pair, at my own door, to my own *cuisinière*?'

'Madame,' the dignitary of the Church responded, in his blandest accents, with that crushing politeness which most Frenchmen know how to employ so effectively against an obtrusive woman, 'we will admit that in the solitary matter of spring chickens the Kabyle morality has hardly emerged as yet above the ordinary Christian gipsy level. Even in France, our peasants, we know, still confuse at times the *meum* and the *tuum*, as our great ladies occasionally confuse their husband and his neighbour. But the Kabyle, nevertheless, if madame will permit me to differ from her on so abstruse a subject, to which she has no doubt devoted no small share of her distinguished consideration—the Kabyle, mademoiselle,' and he turned once more to Iris, 'has still his virtues, distinctively European. He is no nomad, like the Arab; he is fixed, stationary, and open therefore to the first lessons of our higher civilization. *En un mot, il tient à la maison.* He is industrious, sober, habituated to labour. He is a weaver, a potter, a jeweller, a metal-worker. Our Kabyle accepted, but did not embrace,

Islam. He is clothed with it as with a cloak, under which he keeps intact, to this day, his own higher and nobler social habits. He has the idea of the family, the respect for woman. Your sex, mademoiselle, retains even now in his hut its proper position. And he has, above all, that noble sentiment of the soul, the love of his country; he is a patriot, a warrior, a worthy son and defender of his fatherland. It was that elevated sentiment alone which induced him, formerly, to make common cause with an Arab chief like Abd-el-Kader against the arms of our generals; it was that sentiment which drove him, with ill-judged zeal, into the rebellion of El-Mokrani, in the vain endeavour to shake off the yoke which our countrymen had all too lightly imposed upon him. Our task at present is to attach this high and beautiful sentiment of the soul to France, rather than to Algeria; to give the Kabyle also a share in the glories of the French arms and the French civilization; to teach him how to merge his feelings as a mere provincial of Africa in the wider consciousness——'

'Great heavens!' cried Iris, interrupting his discourse, and clapping both her hands suddenly to her ears, 'what was that, Mr. Blake? Just close outside! It was ever so near! Did you hear it? A pistol-shot!'

And even as she spoke a wild cry from without burst all at once upon the startled table. '*Jehad! Jehad! Dehabia Kabyli. Ibahalal Islam!*' And then once more in French, '*A bas les Français!*'

Monseigneur bounded from his seat like one struck.

'A revolt!' he exclaimed aloud, walking over with intrepid calmness to the window. 'I spoke too hastily. The Kabyles have risen! They've proclaimed a Jihad! They're massacring the garrison!'

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE HOLY WAR.

IRIS stood speechless with horror and terror. From the window of the dining-room, whence they looked upon the outer court of the Fort, she could see a turbulent mass of

angry Kabyles, the first in the field, drunk by this time with fanaticism and blood, surging wildly against the bailey gate of the frail little fortress. The vanguard had almost succeeded in surprising the place ; and the postern, even now, was kept open from within, strongly guarded, to give refuge to the panic-stricken and flying colonists from the outside homes. A few Zouaves, hastily summoned from the guard-room, were holding at bay for awhile with fixed bayonets the tumultuous wave of frantic insurgents. A hum as of a beehive pervaded the place. Men, women, and children, pressing their way between escort through the savage crowd under a hot fire, were running the gauntlet for the harbour of refuge. Screams, yells, and bellowings, like those of wild beasts, pursued them to their lair. More and more Kabyles surged up each minute. The Père Baba, in his white bernouse and with his long gray beard all spattered with mud, came rushing for the gate with two children in his arms. Monseigneur, calm and courageous in the midst of the din, recognised the good old man, and, flinging the window open wide, cheered him on with his voice to the place of safety. As he neared the gate, a few of the foremost Kabyles, recognising their friend, refrained from striking him ; but others, shouting aloud ‘Jehad ! Jehad !’ raised their daggers angrily in mid air ; and one shrieking wretch brought down a rusty cutlass on the good priest’s shoulder, making the blood spurt out over the brave old man’s white Kabyle bernouse.

At sight of the blood, Iris cried aloud in terror, and all but fainted. Vernon Blake supported her in his arms to a chair. There she sat and cowered, with her face in her hands, white as a sheet, and incapable for awhile of speech or motion.

But Madame l’Administratrice, nothing daunted by the sight, leaning threateningly out of the open window, cried aloud with the intensest scorn and indignation, ‘Cowards ! cowards ! would you strike a defenceless old man and a pair of poor children ? Come on and fight us, *canaille d’indigènes*, and you’ll get your deserts, as you did in 1870.’ And she flung the dessert-knife she still held in her hand insultingly in their faces, with a whoop of challenge.

The hated face of the woman with high heels seemed to rouse the excitement of the angry Kabyles to a perfect pitch

of ungovernable frenzy. With a rush they dashed at the open gate once more ; and the Zouaves, just hurrying the wounded Père Baba within the walls, were compelled next moment to shut the postern in the face of the last few flying villagers. As they did so, the Kabyles hacked to pieces before their eyes a terrified Frenchwoman, who had fled in frantic alarm for the gate, and then tossed her head contemptuously from a pike in the direction of the window. A bullet came whizzing past madame's ears ; madame withdrew her face rapidly for half a second from their sight, then put it out again like a saucy street child that she was, with her tongue in her cheek and her eyes rolling wickedly.

' *Cochons !* ' she cried again, imperturbable still, but white with rage. ' *Cochons ! Cochons ! Sacrés cochons d'indigènes.* ' And she stuck out her tongue at them in savage exultation.

Monseigneur pulled her gently but firmly within.

' Madame,' he said, in a very stern voice, placing her at the furthest end of the disordered room, ' it is not thus we shall teach these misguided creatures to respect our cause. Not insult, but reason. M. l'Administrateur, permit them to open the gate for me one moment. I will go out as I am, taking my life in my hand, and reason with these poor fanatical people.'

M. l'Administrateur gazed back at him for a second in mild surprise. He was too practical a man not to see clearly that the moment for argument had gone past long since, and that an eminent dignitary of the Church in a violet robe who should venture forth to still their passions just then with Christian advice and sweet reasonableness would assume the unbecoming form of mincemeat in rather less than half a dozen seconds. ' Monseigneur,' he answered, politely but firmly, ' you cannot possibly leave the Fort. Every man within it will be sorely needed soon if we're to hold out till reinforcements can arrive from Algiers. Castellane, look after the guns and the magazine. Randon, hurry up the reserve from the barrack ! Sabaterie, see if they've cut the telegraph-wires, will you ?'

The next ten minutes were a crowded time of manifold sensation and noise and motion, during which Iris was conscious only of continuous firing and confused uproar, and

loud occasional reports from the one big gun of the tiny battery. When she next could recognise anything with distinct perception, she saw that the window was now closed tight with an iron casemate, that all the men, Vernon Blake included, had left the room, that a great glare pervaded the Fort, and that her mother and their hostess were holding her up between them in their arms, and trying to comfort her with tears and kisses.

'I never knew I was such a coward before,' Iris murmured, with some pallid attempt at a smile. 'I'm afraid I should never make a good soldier.'

'My dear,' madame answered, with a sagacious little nod, 'we're all of us just equal cowards in our hearts; only we're a great deal too much ashamed to confess it. But this time the *indigènes* will do for us finally. We're all dead women. They've cut the wires, and no help can come. Nothing on earth can possibly save us. We must make up our minds to die where we stand. For my part,' and the little woman seized another dessert-knife viciously in her fist, 'I'm not going to die without sticking *this*, hilt-deep, into the breast of a dog of a Kabyle.'

'We must make up our minds to die!' Iris repeated, all horror-struck.

'Yes, my dear,' madame answered, with infinite *sang-froid*. 'They'll murder us all. Just the same as they did at Palaestro in 1870.'

Iris, unaccustomed to thus dwelling upon the fiery verge of an active volcano, hid her face in her hands once more at the easy answer; but Madame l'Administratrice, inured to danger, went on glibly in an unconcerned voice:

'I've looked out through the peephole in the casemate of the window, and I can see they're firing the houses and the haystacks. Old Fourchault's haystack's blazing like a bon-fire! *Ciel*, what a blaze! They're putting torches now to the woodwork of the school. There are women and children in there, all huddled together, who came too late to escape into the Fort. They'll be roasted alive in the house pretty soon, unless Hippolyte can get up a sortie to recover them.'

'But who are the men who are doing these fearful things, madame?' Iris cried in horror.

'Your friends, the Beni-Merzoug, for the most part,'

madame answered coolly; 'they and the Beni-Yenni and the Aith-Menguellath.'

'The Beni-Merzoug!' Iris exclaimed, in blank dismay. 'Why, surely those are Meriem's people.'

'*Parfaitement, ma chère,*' madame responded cheerfully. 'And I've very little doubt your good cousin herself's out there, this moment, assisting them to set fire to the little children and old women in the school-house. It amuses them, that—to burn alive little children and poor helpless old women!

A blank silence reigned for some minutes, while Iris cowered and crouched half fainting once more in the corner. She, the Third Classic, the indomitable reasoner, so resolute and determined in every moral crisis, was a physical coward of the feeblest in an emergency like this. Even Mrs. Knyvett herself, she observed to her surprise, was far more composed; while Madame l'Administratrice, that weak little creature, rising with true Parisian buoyancy to the height of the occasion, kept her eye fixed from time to time on the peephole in the casemate, undeterred by the rifle bullets that rattled continually against its resounding surface, and went on with a running comment, undisturbed, on the history of the insurrection.

'They're making a sortie!' she cried at last, with volatile animation, withdrawing her face for a moment from the well-guarded look-out. 'My husband has organized a party of Zouaves. Well done, Hippolyte! Well done, Sabaterie! They've opened the gates and sallied out in good order. . . Monseigneur's with them, and Mr. Blake too. Monseigneur's holding up two fingers to the rebels. The staircase is burnt down, and the women and children are being fired at in a mass by the *cochons d'indigènes*. . . The fire grows heavier and heavier each moment. The rescue party's fought its way through to the door now. Well done, again, Hippolyte! I can see it all plainly by the light of the haystacks. . . They're putting up a ladder to the window for the women to escape. There's Julie Augier on the ladder now, coming down like a bundle. . . She's safe! she's safe! They've caught her and held her! Monseigneur's caught her; *ce brave monseigneur!* Pierre Förstemann the Alsatian's up there, too, with his rifle, picking off

the Kabyles coolly as they approach the ring; he's a splendid shot, Pierre; he'll bowl them over. . . . Mr. Blake's on the ladder now, handing down the children. They're firing at him, I think; I can see a Kabyle dog just pointing his rifle. Ha! yes. *Quel dommage!* He's hit him on the arm! He's pinked his man. He's badly hurt. The arm's bleeding!

'Hit whom?' Iris cried, in an agony of suspense.

'Mr. Blake,' madame answered, her blood all afire with the excitement of the scene. 'But *n'importe!* Our men have covered him well; they're bringing him back. These savages shan't have his body. The women and children are all safe, too. Blake was handing down a little girl—the very last left—when a bullet struck him on the left forearm. Well thrust, *mon caporal!* Well thrust, indeed! They'll have him under cover in the gateway shortly.'

'Let me go!' Iris cried, rising white and wan; 'let me go and take care of him. Is he dangerously wounded, do you think? Oh, madame, madame, is he dangerously wounded?'

'The roof's falling in now,' madame went on, unmoved. 'The fire has caught it. *Ciel!* what a grand sight! I can see the flames bursting up like red tongues through the broken crevices. What a magnificent thing! Red jets of fire shoot from the interior! I wish I was a man! I wish I was a soldier! I should like to go out and have a shot at these savages!'

'Have they got back Mr. Blake yet?' Iris asked in profound anxiety.

'They're fighting their way back in a hollow square,' madame answered, all agog. 'Hand-to-hand fight. Glorious! magnificent! The Zouaves outside, the women and children and wounded in the centre of the square. *Mon Dieu*, it's splendid! but, oh! what hot work!' She gave a little scream. 'They've wounded the *sous-lieutenant!* But *mon Dieu*, how they fight! I never saw anything finer in my life. The Kabyles are pouring in upon them on every side like ants from an anthill. The Zouaves are pushing them back—thrust, thrust, thrust—with fixed bayonets, and firing from the second rank inside upon those frightful creatures. And the blood! oh, the blood! *Ma chère*, it's flowing!

Quel bruit, quel carnage ! One can see the blood red by the glare of the haystacks. . . They're close by the gate now ; Sabaterie's leading them. Hippolyte's waving his sabre in the air. . . They've opened the gates to these brave folk, and they're taking in the wounded. Lange is firing among the savages with the great gun ! *Morbleu !* what blood ! Fire flashes from every bush and rock. *Que c'est affreux ! Que c'est magnifique !*

'And Mr. Blake?' Iris asked, too terrified now to make any pretence at cloaking her special interest in that one non-combatant.

'Mr. Blake's inside the wall all safe, and Hippolyte's shaking his sabre in their faces, insulting those wretches before he closes the gate for ever upon them. Well done, Hippolyte ! *C'est bien fait, mon enfant.* I never admired my husband before ; but to-night, *voyez vous*—what a chance ! what a change ! I could lay down my life for him.'

In two minutes more that disordered dining-room was filled afresh with pale women and children, too terrified even to cry, and men with bleeding arms to be stanchd and bandaged. Madame l'Administratrice, well used to such work, turned aside instantly to tear up linen rag into long strips, and to encourage and tend these brave defenders. Finger-glasses supplied water to stanch open wounds, and dinner-napkins were hastily turned by deft hands into impromptu tourniquets. Iris, now partially recovered from her first wild scare, collected her thoughts to put in practice on Vernon Blake's cut and bleeding arm the lessons she had learned at her Cambridge ambulance classes. And without, the noise grew louder and fiercer, and the glare broke stronger with a more lurid light through the creaking cracks of the iron casemate.

In half an hour a Zouave, all grimy with smoke and blood and powder, came up from below with an urgent message.

'Monsieur desires me to tell madame,' he said, not forgetting his military salute even at that moment of danger, 'that we have ammunition enough to resist for three days, and that in any case we can hold out till to-morrow morning. If a rescue arrives, all will be well. He will send a messenger out to Tizi-Ouzou.'

‘The messenger will never get there,’ madame answered, with a shrill little laugh of despair. ‘He’ll be cut into a thousand very small pieces before he can break through the line of Beni-Merzoug. But never mind. If we die, we’ll have killed three times ourselves in Kabyles!’

CHAPTER XXXVI

DESPAIR.

BUT alone, on the summit of the Col, beneath the steep slopes of Lalla Khadidja, Eustace Le Marchant knelt in agony on the crisp smooth snow, beside half-lifeless Meriem, giving up all for lost, both there and at St. Cloud, in his utter helplessness. A mile or two of snow still remained to be traversed before they could reach the beginning of bare ground once more on the downward slope; and Meriem, in her present state of collapse, was wholly unfit to continue a hundred yards further.

The cold was intense, and the wind blew through him.

If only he could carry her! But the idea was impracticable. He had walked too far. His strength was used up. They must both sit down and die together.

And yet, how easy the slope looked! A smooth descent down a long and even snow-clad valley. No glaciers here, as in the High Alps; no peaks or snow bridges; no probing with the axe, or cutting steps in ice; no moraines or precipices; no boulders or crevasses; nothing but one long level slope of snowbank. It looked as easy as those great drifts he had often slid down on a toboggan at Quebec the year he was working upon the *coleoptera* of Canada.

And then, with a flash of inspiration, the idea seized him: Why not slide down with Meriem in his arms—if only he could find something solid to slide upon?

But what? The very hope seemed to mock his despair. Not a stick or a stone lay about anywhere. Nothing but snow, snow, snow, all round. And the pitiless flakes still fell over them as they sat, and covered Meriem’s dress with their cold white crystals.

He was kneeling, but on what? Not on the fresh-fallen

snow. He sank into that for a full inch, and then supported himself on a hard crust beneath. He knew well what that hard crust meant. A thin layer of ice had frozen on top of the older snow—a layer solid enough and firm enough to support him.

When snow falls and lies long in a cold climate or on high mountains, the heat of the sun often melts the surface on warm days, and the melted top then freezes hard at night, forming a sort of crust or semi-solid layer, which caps the soft and powdery under-stratum. On such a crust Le Marchant was kneeling. His heart gave a bound as he seemed to feel its value to him in this last extremity.

‘Lend me your knife, Meriem,’ he said suddenly.

‘What for?’ Meriem cried, roused to horror at the demand. ‘You don’t want to do yourself any harm, do you, Eustace?’

‘No,’ Eustace answered, holding her tight for warmth against his own breast. ‘I only want to cut some ice. I’ll show you why soon, Meriem.’

Meriem took from her girdle the little ornamental dagger, set with knobs of coral and lapis lazuli, that all unmarried Kabyle girls wear by their side, and handed it without a word, in her numbed fingers, to her eager companion. A sudden thought seemed to strike her as she lay.

‘If I die here, Eustace,’ she cried, with energy, ‘and you have strength to go on upon your way to Bouira, will you promise me to take the charm from my neck and throw it in a fire, without ever opening it?’

‘You will *not* die, Meriem,’ Eustace answered firmly. ‘Or, if you do, I will die here beside you.’

‘But promise me, at any rate!’ Meriem gasped out, shivering.

‘I’ll promise you anything, Meriem,’ the Englishman answered, pressing her hand hard. ‘And if I die with you here, I shall die happy.’

‘Thank you, Meriem said. ‘You are very good, Eustace. I told you before, I love you as I love no one else on earth but Vernon.’

Eustace took the knife and proceeded to cut out with it a large square or oblong cake of the under surface—the icy layer—some seven or eight feet long, and broad in propor-

tion. Then he shovelled away the upper snow cautiously with his arms, and drew it out with care on the freshly fallen surface. If it broke, they were lost; but if only he could manage to seat Meriem accurately in the very middle, and push it before him with hands or feet, it would go like a toboggan, he fondly fancied, down these smooth slopes.

It was a forlorn hope; that last straw to which the drowning man proverbially clings, but, alas for Eustace! it was insane, impracticable. As he lifted Meriem and placed her on the frail seat, the ice shattered at once into a thousand fragments. He wondered at his own insensate folly in hoping it would bear her. That ice go down a whole mountain-side! Why, it splintered at a touch. Ridiculous! Impossible!

He sat down on the snow once more in despair.

‘If we had only some wine!’ he said. ‘Some brandy! Anything!’

Meriem opened her eyes at the sound, and answered feebly, with a flash of remembrance, ‘Your flask is at my girdle. I forgot it till now. I snatched it up as we were leaving the tent. There’s something in it. I thought you might want it.’

With a wild cry of joy, Le Marchant seized the bottle eagerly from her side, and unscrewed the top with numbed white fingers. It was whisky, neat, and happily more than half full.

‘Thank God!’ he cried, ‘we’re saved, Meriem;’ and he poured out a wine-glassful into the cup beneath, tempering the raw spirit with a handful of snow that melted in it instantly. ‘Here, drink this off,’ he went on, holding it to her blue lips; ‘it’ll give us both strength to go on to Bouira.’

‘Is it wine?’ Meriem asked. ‘I never tasted any. You know we’re not allowed to drink wine, we Moslems.’

‘No, it’s *not* wine!’ Le Marchant answered firmly. ‘And you’re *not* a Moslem! And whether you like or not, you must drink it instantly!’

Meriem drank it off without further parley.

‘Why, it warms one at once,’ she cried in surprise. ‘I never in my life felt anything like it.’

Le Marchant tossed down a good draught himself.

‘Now, we’ll wait five minutes for that to take effect,’ he said, with fresh hope; ‘and then, as soon as it’s begun to strengthen us, if I have to carry you down the whole way in my arms, we’ll go on, Meriem.’

But in a few minutes Meriem, summoning up all her courage, and refreshed by the stimulant, was ready once more to start off walking again with a spasmodic effort.

The downward slope was far easier than the upward one. Sometimes by sliding, sometimes by a *glissade*, and sometimes by trudging through the soft snow, they made their way toilsomely and slowly to the point where the snow ceased on the mountain. Already the exercise and the higher temperature made Meriem warmer. As they reached the last edge of the deep snow, she said, with a fresh access of feverish energy:

‘I can walk on now to the bottom, Eustace.’

On, and ever on, they tramped accordingly, in the early morning, the dawn just beginning to whiten the east in the direction of the iron line they could now see dimly below them in the gorge of the river. Meriem had never set eyes on a railway before, but she was the first to make it out, with its rigid curve, and she guessed what it meant.

‘The iron road,’ she cried, for she had forgotten the English name that Eustace called it. ‘We haven’t so far to go now. I can hold out still, if I drop when I get there.’

It was five o’clock in the morning when they reached the gorge itself, and stood by the side of the single line of railway. Eastward, the next station was not in sight; but westward, beyond the river, they had descried from the heights houses and a steeple. That must be Beni-Mansour Station, Eustace thought, from the lie of the country. They turned their weary feet in that direction, walking along the line, and treading on the ties; if only they could once reach a station, they could telegraph on for aid in all directions.

A hundred yards further on they came to a bridge. It was an iron-girder bridge, thrown boldly across the river from bank to bank of the wide gorge. But there was no footway. The rails ran along skeleton-wise upon sleepers and ties; the work beneath was open trestle-work of the

American type. Meriem looked along at it with doubt and hesitation.

‘It’s hardly a kilomètre to the station,’ she said, shrinking back. ‘But, Eustace, I daren’t cross that thing now. If it were up in our mountains, and I were fresh and strong, perhaps I might venture! but I’m so very weak and giddy with fatigue and hunger! Leave me here—leave me here for awhile—and send people back to me from the village with food. I shall be quite safe where I am, you know. I shall sit by the roadside, and nothing will hurt me.’

Le Marchant considered seriously for a moment with himself. She was certainly in a very weak and faint condition. It required nerve and strength to cross that bridge. He hardly cared even to face the task himself. Yet, on the other hand, he didn’t like to leave Meriem alone and unprotected by the open roadside. He reflected, however, that Kabyle maidens are generally very well able to take care of themselves; and also, which was perhaps a great deal more to the point, that nobody was likely to be passing at that early hour down an uninhabited gorge, along a lonely railway line. As the outcome of which deliberation, he decided at last it would be best to leave Meriem by herself for the time being, and hurry on, for her sake as well as for the sake of the besieged at St. Cloud, to the nearest village. The sooner he could get there, the sooner she would have food, warmth, and shelter. Though it looked, perhaps, a little cruel and unchivalrous to leave her, it was the truest chivalry and kindness in the end—the only way to procure her all that she needed.

‘Very well, Meriem,’ he said, with regretful decision. ‘Sit here by the side; I won’t be long. I shall come back to you soon with food and clothing.’ Then a sudden idea struck him as he turned to go. ‘You must take care of the engine,’ he said, in a warning voice; ‘you know what that is—the great iron horse that comes puffing and snorting along the rails. If it passes by while you’re here, don’t go on the line, or it’ll run you down and crush you to atoms. Better not stir at all from the spot. Sit where you are by the side till I return; don’t move hand or foot, for fear of danger.’

Meriem nodded her weary head in assent, and took his

hand in her own, dreamily. She raised it to her mouth, and printed a kiss upon it. Eustace stooped down and kissed her forehead in return.

‘Good-bye, Meriem,’ he said, ‘I shall soon be back. Good-bye, my child, and take care of the engine.’

And he turned to make his way across that dangerous bridge, with a wave of his hand towards the half-fainting Kabyle girl.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

PERIL.

THE bridge proved harder by far to pass than Eustace had at all at first anticipated. It was one of those spider-like trestle structures with which Transatlantic engineers have made us so familiar; and its lightness and airiness were in American extremes. The ties stood open rather far apart; the gorge below yawned deep and rock-bound; and the distance bridged seemed out of all proportion to the actual size of the torrent stream, owing to the immense width and abrupt descent of the chasm-like valley. At every step along those open sleepers the Englishman’s knees trembled under him. He dared not look down at the abyss below; he dared not look back at poor weary Meriem, for fear he should grow giddy and lose balance entirely. He could only walk on—walk on mechanically, planting one foot after another on the uncertain ties, and steadying himself as best he might, with his arms spread out like an acrobat or a rope-dancer.

It would have been a ticklish task even at the best of times. With his numbed and weary limbs, after that long tramp, it was almost too much for him. He had got half-way over, however, in safety, when a strange, dull noise vibrating along the metals underfoot made him start and listen with vivid eagerness. Hark! what was that? The rails seemed to thrill with an indefinite hum. A moment’s suspense! Then he heard a voice calling to him aloud from the further bank.

‘Eustace, Eustace!’ the voice cried in agony. ‘It’s coming! It’s coming!’

He knew what that meant. He recognised his peril. It was Meriem crying aloud to warn him of his danger. With a thump of the heart he took it all in.

The morning train from Setif to Palaestro!

O God!—O God! it was rushing down upon him resistlessly.

There was no time to think or to plan escape now. No place to turn aside, to right or to left. Only the line itself, and the river beneath. He could hear the wild dash of the engine as it came roaring and thundering down that steep incline to the mountain river. He could hear the rattle and ring of the rails as they grated under the wheels. The brake was pressed hard. It thrilled and resounded along the trestles of the bridge. He realized the deadly peril in which he stood. But for one thing he was grateful. Thank Heaven, he hadn't tried to take Meriem over with him!

Meriem, at least, was safe from peril.

His first thought was to make a wild dash for it, and try to get to the other end of the long bridge before that rushing engine could reach and overtake him. But one second sufficed to show him how mad and hopeless was that wild plan; how impossible the chance of getting across before the engine bore him down. Only one bid for life yet remained—for Meriem's sake, and the besieged in the mountains. Like a flash, the solution occurred to his quick mind. He must lower himself on his hands in the gap between the ties, hang on by his fingers as one hangs on to a trapeze, and let the engine and train pass bodily over him.

It was a bold idea, yet not wholly impracticable. For as soon as it had passed, he could raise himself up again on his elbows, like a gymnast, and continue his journey to the nearest station. But for the moment, dear life was all he thought about.

Quick as thought, he lowered himself on his hands as steadily as he could manage, and placing one foot against an angle of the iron trestle-work at the side—the rod attachments were too thick and too big to climb by—clung with hooked fingers to the sleeper above in speechless suspense and quivering expectation. How long he might have to wait there he had no conception. But he waited for ages. Hours, days, years, seemed to pass slowly before

that rushing engine, at full speed, rolled over his head with its rattling burden. There he hung, inert, between earth and sky, with one foot just poised against the elbow of the trestle-work, and the other dangling loose in empty space, and heard the great iron horse dash, puffing and panting, across the long line of iron girders, in slow haste to destroy him. Would he have nerve to cling on when once it got fairly overhead, he wondered? He hardly dared to hope it, his hands quivered and shook so much already. The mere physical jar and concussion as the train passed by would perhaps suffice to loosen and shake off his tremulous fingers. Fatigue and hunger had unnerved him already: the ordeal was a harder one than his exhausted frame was then and there prepared to go through.

But Meriem at least was safe upon the bank! Thank Heaven for that. He had not foolishly and thoughtlessly imperilled Meriem.

Jar, jar, jar: how the girders rocked! The train was coming rolling and rattling on. It approached, it approached; nearer, nearer, nearer. He saw the lumbering engine pass slowly overhead. The boiler went over him, grate, grate, grate. The funnel puffed and steamed and snorted. The fire glowed red above his face with a fierce hot glow. But still he held on, trembling, trembling violently. Great heavens! would the thing take all day to go past? Each instant seemed to lengthen itself out into an eternity!

A second's breathing-space. The engine had passed him!

Then the tender went next, jar, jar, jar, jar. And after it the carriages, with their unconscious living load of humanity, not one soul of whom knew how an unhappy fellow-creature was hanging on below there for dear life with straining hands to the ties and sleepers. One, two, three, four of them, each jarring separately, and each almost shaking him from his insecure hold with those numbed, dead fingers. A cattle-truck next; two, three, four, five, six goods-waggon. And then a pause. Eustace breathed again. Thank Heaven! thank Heaven! the jar was over. The train had passed. He might safely get up again.

But when he came to try, his cramped hands refused to raise their heavy burden. He hadn't purchase enough to pull himself up. He must wait for a few minutes and

recover his strength. The nervous strain had unmanned him for the moment.

So he waited, waited; half fainted, but waited.

Another quick change! Great heavens! what was this? The jar ceased abruptly. The girders left off vibrating one moment. The train had stopped before reaching the end! Something must have happened. Then suddenly the jolting began once more, but *in the opposite direction*. A horrible doubt appalled his mind. Next instant the doubt resolved itself into a certainty. The engine was reversed! The train was coming back again!

Could he muster up strength to face it out? Could he ever hold on till it had reached once more the other side, numbed and cramped as he was already with his superhuman effort?

And even if it went back and passed him over unhurt, it must still go on a second time, and make its way finally to Bouira and Palaestro. Twice more of that speechless, indescribable suspense! Twice more of that horrible grating and jarrying! He could never endure it. It would kill him with the uncertainty.

Back, back they came, all those same cruel carriages, in reversed order.

One, two, three, four, five, six—those were the goods-waggons. He counted them all, waggon by waggon, a long age each, going slowly over again. Then the cattle-truck; he could hear the oxen in it. Then one, two, three, four—eastward they went again, those four passenger carriages. Jar, jar, jar, as they passed overhead; the grating this time far more deliberate and worse than ever. The tender rolled next, on slow, slow wheels; and now for the danger of dangers—the engine. That was worst of all, because of the heat and glare and blast of the furnace. If it halted over his head (and it was going very slow), the heat would torture him: it would be all up with him.

How instantaneous is thought! how swift! how indivisible! In that second of time between the tender and the boiler he caught himself speculating in his whirling brain why the train had turned back on the bridge at all, and how long it would wait before it went on again.

Then the boiler came, and with it oblivion.

All he knew clearly was that a dart of pain, presumably in the hand, was followed fast by a faint sensation of rushing air buoying him up all round—a sudden plunge, a thud, a stoppage. The universe seemed to reel and whirl around him. All else was blank. He had fallen insensible.

One spurt of boiling water from the engine as it passed had dropped accidentally on the hooked hand that barely clutched the rugged sleeper. That sudden throb of scalding pain made him relax his tenacious muscles instinctively. It was all up then. His hands let go. He had fallen on to the sandbank that bounded the river.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

WHY IT STOPPED.

AND Meriem? Well, the train was putting back to pick up Meriem.

When Eustace left her, she had sat for awhile listless on the bare bank, too weary to think of anything but her own fatigue, and longing for rest and food and release from anxiety. For Vernon Blake's danger was still an ever-present reality to her mind, persisting through everything as a vague background of consciousness. She watched Eustace, as in a trance, making his way slowly over those open ties. Would he get across the bridge in safety, she wondered, half dreamily—would he get across and rouse Algiers in time to rescue Iris and Vernon?

So she sat there listless, with her eyes partly closed. But, like all mountaineers, she had keen hearing. An indefinite hum soon attracted her attention. What was that faint, low noise that buzzed along the line? A distant b'r'r, that seemed to shake the bridge? Though she had never beheld a railway-line in her life before, she felt sure it was the train coming up from eastward.

A train she knew only as a wonderful, horrible, death-dealing machine. Strange stories had reached her ears in her remote mountains of the magic pace and dangerous whirl of those inventions of Satan, which run a man down before ever he can cross the path in front of them. The

infidels knew how to make wild iron horses that careered along the ground with dizzy speed, like birds on the wing, or shooting-stars in heaven. If any living creature presented itself in their way when they were in full flight (may Allah preserve us!) they crushed it in their wrath under their heavy wheels, as an angry bull crushes a grasshopper beneath his tread on his way to dash fiercely at a bellowing rival. Those who have never seen a locomotive have always heard of it, indeed, chiefly as a fearful engine of destruction. Meriem's terrors were raised to the highest pitch of superstitious awe, as she saw the great snorting and puffing creature, breathing fire from its nostrils, wheel rapidly round the corner of the mountain, and bear down with a wild swoop upon the bridge in front of her—the bridge where Eustace was feeling his way slowly, with tentative feet, above the yawning abyss of the gorge of Isser.

And it was she who had sent him on his awful errand! She who had urged him to cross the bridge! She who had asked him to try that dangerous path, for Vernon's sake—for Vernon's and Iris's!

He was so good, so brave, so true, so gentle! And he loved her so truly! How could she ever have sacrificed that earnest soul to her unkind lover? Her heart smote her with a terrible remorse. She flung herself on the line in an agony of regret.

'Eustace!' she cried, in a wild cry of despair, 'Eustace! Eustace! it's coming, Eustace!'

But he never heard her, or, if he heard, he never turned his face aside to listen for one moment. It would crush him where he stood before ever he was aware of it!

If only she had done as Eustace told her—waited patiently by the side, and never stirred from her place, come what might, all might yet have gone well with them. The train would have passed over his head in safety, and Eustace, when it had passed, might have summoned up his strength, by slow degrees, to raise himself on his elbows to the level of the bridge again. But what woman on earth could keep her presence of mind enough to obey a man's instructions at such a crisis? She only knew that Eustace was in danger—that she had sent him to his death—that for her sake he had gone—that at all hazards she must try to save him.

The horrible thing was deaf and blind, and senseless, indeed, as it came roaring and rushing with lightning speed down that steep incline; but it had a man on board, no doubt; an infidel at the helm, but still a man who guided and directed it. She would fling herself in front of it and attract his attention. She would throw up her arms and beckon him to stop. He would pull up, perhaps (if to pull up were possible), when he saw a woman on the line before him, waving her hands and shouting to him frantically.

For though she had never seen a train in her life before, she saw at a glance how it ran upon its rails, and took in, instinctively, the main manner of its external working.

Running backwards on the line before the advancing engine, she flung up her hands with all the energy of despair, and waved her white haik wildly in the breeze, to catch, if possible, the engine-driver's attention.

Nearer and ever nearer came that horrible thing, snorting steam from its uncouth mouth, and glowing in its front, like some living creature eager to swoop down upon her of set purpose, to crush and destroy her. But she had no thought for herself; she thought only of Eustace. It might knock her down and run over her lifeless body at its own fierce will, if only she could make it halt before it reached Eustace—Eustace, Eustace, O Allah, Eustace! She ran backward, ever backward, without looking where she went, waving her hands wildly, and shouting in Kabyle, 'Stop, stop, in Allah's name stop, for mercy!' till she almost reached the beginning of the bridge, where she would have fallen through the open spaces, or been crushed between the ties by the devouring engine.

But before she reached it, the unspeakable thing, now slackening its pace somewhat, as if in answer to her cries, was fairly upon her. No matter for that. She knew it was slackening! Then they saw her! They saw her! They meant to pull up! Perhaps the thing would stop before it reached Eustace.

'For Allah's sake, stop; for mercy! for mercy!'

Next instant the buffer had struck her full on the bosom. She stumbled and fell. Lights danced before her sight. A terrible sense of a stunning blow overcame and sickened her. She closed her eyes wearily. And all was silence.

The driver of the morning train from Setif, looking ahead along the line as he turned that sharp corner before reaching the trestle bridge across the Isser, had been surprised to see a woman—*une indigène*—these natives are so foolish—running backward on the line, with her face towards the engine, and waving her hands frantically before her face, to stop him.

'*Tiens,*' he remarked with philosophic calm to his friend the stoker, '*voilà encore une de ces imbéciles qui désire se faire calandrer comme on calandre le linge chez la blanchisseuse*; and yet, if we run over her, they'll start a *procès-verbal* against us, *par exemple*, for causing the death of a native by carelessness. Those idiots of lawyers!'

But he did his best, none the less, in his own interest, to avert a catastrophe. Those idiots of lawyers must be pacified somehow.

The train was rushing down the incline with all steam on, to mount the steep gradient on the other side, as it went towards Bouira; but the brake had been well in hand for the purpose of turning the sharp corner of the gorge in safety, and the engine-driver was therefore able to apply it in hot haste the moment he saw that mad Kabyle figure careering and gesticulating along the single line right in front of him. The man on the bridge he did not see; that dancing creature in the wild white robe distracted his attention from all else beyond for the first few seconds; and before he could recover his presence of mind sufficiently to grasp the whole situation at once, Eustace, letting himself down by his hands between the girders, had disappeared beneath the ties among the mazes of the trestle-work. However, the woman alone was well worth stopping for; those idiots of lawyers hold you guilty of contributory negligence, worse luck! if you don't pull up sharp even for a suicide. The driver put on the break quick and hard; the hiss of it grated with jarring vibration all along the whole length of the bridge and the girders.

But it isn't so easy to stop a train, either, going full pelt, by steam and gravity, down a steep incline, with a bridge at the bottom. Before he had time to bring the engine fairly to a standstill, the buffers had hit that frantic Kabyle woman full on the breast, and the train had passed calmly

and resistlessly on across the level of the bridge in front of her. It was only when they had almost reached the opposite side that the wheels with difficulty obeyed the break, and pulled up sharp midway with a jar that grated hard through the long line of carriages.

A dozen heads peeped forth at once, inquisitive, from a dozen windows. '*Qu'est-ce qu'il-y-a donc ?*' a dozen querulous voices exclaimed in concert in their highest key. And the guard, from his little perched box behind, responded cheerfully, 'As far as I can see, *messieurs et mesdames*, there's no harm done! An incident of Algeria! We've run over an *indigène* !'

'Nothing wrong with the train, my dear,' a reassuring papa, in a black skull-cap, withdrawing his head, remarked to a tremulous mamma huddled up in a corner. '*Pas de déraillement !* The engine's all right. We've only stopped because we've had the misfortune to run over a stray Kabyle woman.'

'*Pas plus que ça !*' madame answered, consoled, and settled herself down comfortably once more in her rugs in the corner.

But in the roadway behind, Meriem lay stunned and bleeding on the line; and midway across the bridge, Eustace Le Marchant still clung with hooked hands for dear life to the sleepers beneath them.

'What to do?' the engine-driver murmured in doubt to his friend the stoker.

'Go back,' the stoker answered, with glib suggestiveness, 'and pick up the body. Strictly *en règle*. That satisfies the Court. It shows at least (sacred name of a dog!) you've done the best you could to avert an accident.'

'You have reason, *mon vieux*,' the engine-driver answered, slapping him on the back, and reversing his locomotive. '*Allons donc*, let us pick her up, as you say, for form's sake, this mangled-out Kabyle woman.'

So they turned and went back to pick up Meriem.

And as they passed the spot where Eustace still clung with all his might to the hard angles of wood, three or four boiling drops from the waste-pipe, turned on by the reversal, happened to fall on his left knuckles, and finished the task of sending him to the bottom.

The little tragedy worked itself out in its own dim way, all unknown to the principal but unconscious actors.

So they picked up Meriem, a bleeding mass of limbs and clothes, and laid her with rough, unfeeling hands on the floor of an empty third-class carriage.

'*Tiens,*' the passenger in the skull-cap remarked with animation to the guard as he passed, looking down into the sand at the bottom of the ravine. 'Do you run over many of them here in this gorge? There's another *indigène* lying stiff and dead on the bank down yonder by the side of the torrent there.' For Eustace's new suit of Kabyle costume had, of course, transformed him in outward appearance into a complete and very unmistakable Algerian native.

'*C'est vrai,*' the guard answered, shading his eyes with his hand against the newly-risen sun, and casting a curious glance down the deep ravine. 'But, thank Heaven, we've nothing to do with *him*, at any rate, we others. We can tell the people at the station to fetch him along and make all inquiries. Her husband, no doubt! Tumbled over and killed. It was him, you may be sure, she was making such a fuss about. They trespass like cows on the line, these *indigènes*!'

And the incident being thus satisfactorily closed, the train steamed on gaily upon its way once more, with Meriem's body safely aboard, and arrived, to the stoker's conscious pride, only seven minutes behind the advertised time at Beni-Mansour Station.

'There's another of them lying dead in the gulley down below,' the engine-driver observed to the *chef de gare*, with a wave of his hand towards where Eustace lay huddled. 'A monsieur in a first-class carriage detected him. You'd better tell the Sisters at the Home over yonder to send out a stretcher to bring him up, and get him laid out and buried decently.'

For accidents *will* happen, even on the best regulated French railways.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE BELEAGUERED FORT.

ALL night long, St. Cloud held out bravely; and all night long fresh hordes of insurgents kept pouring in from outlying villages on the inaccessible spurs of distant hills; for the Kabyles, like the eagles, perch their eyries on the topmost ledges of the mountain-peaks, where no other foot can easily follow them. All night long, too, Iris Knyvett sat, white and anxious, tending Vernon Blake and the other wounded men, while that hideous din continued to wax fiercer and ever fiercer outside, and that awful glare to glow redder and ever redder through the cracks of the casemate. Even Madame l'Administratrice herself felt her martial ardour cool somewhat, as she saw how the natives gathered thick in fresh swarms around that doomed Fort—one seething, surging mass of half-savage humanity, now hanging by hundreds like bees from a branch on the bare brick walls of the frail fortress, and pressing on to their death with Mahommedan ardour in the cumbered line of the shallow green fosses.

‘The more we mow down, the more seem to grow up afresh,’ madame exclaimed at last, raising her hands in horror and astonishment to heaven. ‘They use each other’s bodies like rats or vermin, just to make a bridge of dead for the survivors to trample on. The hateful creatures! I wish I was a man! I’d like to go out and have a good shot at them myself before they hacked me into little pieces.’

And even as she spoke, a loud yell of triumph arose up anew from the Kabyle ranks. They had succeeded in setting alight the gateway of the Fort. Big bursts of flame spurted forth from the loopholes. The red tongues of fire were already mounting high upon the stone lintels.

‘Unless reinforcements arrive by mid-day,’ Madame l'Administratrice remarked, surveying the situation with critical coolness through her tortoiseshell glasses, ‘we shall have to surrender, as they did at Palaestro in ’71; and then, my dear,’ she drew her hand suggestively, with a sudden click, across her small white throat, ‘the savages will make mincemeat of us; it’ll be all up with us.’

'What happened at Palaestro in '71?' Iris asked, with a shudder, as the shouts once more rose loud and clear from the gateway heavenward.

'Ah, my dear,' the little Frenchwoman answered, with a sagacious nod, 'you should just have been here then; that was something like fighting. You'd have known what an insurrection was like, I can tell you. I was the only woman who escaped alive from old St. Cloud; and at Palaestro—pouf!—with a boum! boum! boum! they extinguished the garrison after it had surrendered.'

'After it had surrendered?' Iris repeated, shrinking.

'Ah, after it had surrendered, *je le crois bien, mon enfant!* Murdered them all in cold blood. The settlers held out to the very last moment in the *maison cantonnière* and the Gendarmerie next door. But when the Gendarmerie was almost tumbling in ruins about their heads—riddled through and through, as we shall be soon—Bassetti and the rest came out on parole—that brave Bassetti—with a promise that they might retire with credit, their arms in their hands, *bien entendu*, for the honour of France, to the nearest civilized settlement in the district. Nothing more military—they surrendered on terms. They carried their arms out with them, like true French soldiers. *Hé bien, ma chère*, as soon as they'd got just outside the house—on terms, remember—*houp, sauve qui peut*, the savages were down upon them, knocking them over with the butt-ends of their rifles, and massacring them then and there in cold blood, with true Kabyle treachery. Poor old men and beardless boys, *voyez-vous bien?* Do you wonder that I hate them, then, these *cochons d'indigènes?*

Iris shuddered.

'It's terrible,' she cried, 'terrible, terrible!'

'And to think, Iris dear,' Mrs. Knyvett remarked, with superfluous reproachfulness under these painful circumstances, 'that if it hadn't been for you, and your determined opposition to your dear uncle, we might have been sitting at our ease this very minute in Sir Arthur's villa at Mustapha Supérieur, not knowing there were such people as Kabyles anywhere! Oh! if I only once get out of this horrible place, I'll never, never, as long as I live, go among such frightful creatures again—never, never, never, never!'

‘But you won’t get out of it, *chère dame*,’ madame continued complacently, just grasping her meaning through the mist of her English; ‘I was coming to that. I was just going to tell you; they’ll do with us precisely as they did at Palaestro—they’ll murder us wholesale. T’chlk, t’chlk, t’chlk at every one of our throats. It’s a Jihad, you know—a holy war; and in a Jihad, madame, there’s no keeping troth or trust with the infidels. Well, the women and children were in the *maison cantonnière*, as I was on the point of telling you (whew! what a bullet! it nearly made a hole through the casemate). They held out there, with just a handful of men, till the fire around them actually scorched and burnt their dresses; and then, of course, they could hold out no longer. So they surrendered at last—surrendered on terms of sparing their poor little lives alone. The savages accepted them. But as soon as they came down, r’r’r, the same as before—the men were killed—just knocked on the head, so, before the women’s eyes; and the women were stripped of their very clothes, and handed over, in I dare not tell you what shameful condition, to the tender mercies of those savage brutes there. That’s what *we* may expect, if Hippolyte’s fool enough to listen to terms. But I hope he won’t. For my part, I’d sooner die first, with my tongue in my cheek, flinging a curse with my last good breath against those dogs of savages.’

With such cheering conversation the night wore through and the morning dawned upon their weary eyelids. More and more Kabyles seemed to burst upon them for ever. Monseigneur and Blake, and the other wounded who could still bear arms, had gone out long since perforce to join the shattered little band of tired defenders. The guard-room and dwelling-house alone held out now. The courtyard of the fort was in the hands of the enemy.

‘Unless reinforcements arrive before noon,’ the commandant said, with a despondent glance at the enemy, ‘we must ask for terms. We can’t hold out much longer now against such overwhelming numbers.’

‘Let us die where we stand first,’ Sabaterie answered with a shudder. ‘For the sake of the women, let us all die fighting.’

Presently the front of the house became quite untenable.

‘We must put you on the terrace,’ M. l’Administrateur said quietly, coming up to the women. ‘You’ll be out of reach of the bullets there. Duck behind the parapet. When that’s no longer safe, we must take such terms as they choose to offer us.’

‘No terms! No terms!’ madame answered firmly.

The women and children, huddling close together, made their way out by the steps at the back on to the flat top of the old Moorish villa. A wall surrounded it on each side, a foot or two high, and sufficiently thick to be quite bullet-proof. Madame l’Administratrice, irrepressible still, raised her head for a moment above the summit of this parapet to see how the fight now went below. In a second, the sight of that hated face drew a shower of fire once more from the Kabyles in the courtyard, who, inspired alike by bigotry and hate, thirsted for the blood of the high-heeled woman. The indomitable little soul, not daunted even now, drew off one of her dainty Parisian evening shoes—a strange reminder of last night’s suddenly-interrupted festivities—and held it on a casual fragment of bamboo high above the parapet.

‘Let them waste their bullets on that,’ she cried derisively; and waste them they did, indeed, in good earnest, for in another minute not a shred was left of the insulting token.

Madame knew as well as they did by what nickname she was called among the wild tribes, and she flaunted in their faces in this last extremity that expressive symbol of her hated presence.

All through the morning, the little garrison still held out by superhuman efforts. Noon came at last, and with it the glare of an almost tropical sun. Icy cold as it had been on the snow-clad tops of the Djurjura last night, when Meriem crossed them, it was broiling hot now in the full eye of heaven on the whitewashed roof of that flat open terrace. A burning sky hung hazy blue overhead, and a hot sirocco swept on with fierce force from the sweltering desert. All round, the smoke and heat of a great conflagration went up in blinking mist from the ruddy ruins of the still-smouldering village. Nothing remained of St. Cloud to behold, indeed, but charred and blackened sites, and broken walls, and that one gaunt Fort, now tumbling visibly to pieces by

slow degrees before the vigorous assault of the victorious Kabyles.

Their only hope lay in the arrival of succour. Had any rumour of the rising yet reached Algiers? Had any messenger descended on the rail at Beni-Mansour? Could troops hurry up from Tizi-Ouzou or Fort National?

Or were Tizi-Ouzou and Fort National themselves, too, in flames? Was this a general rising of all the confederated Algerian tribes, or a mere local and isolated Kabyle insurrection?

They knew nothing. They could guess nothing. They could only wait and hope and wonder, and look with straining eyes along those two white lines curling round among the hills, that showed above the parapet in either direction—the roads to the nearest European stations.

By noon, the situation was no longer tenable. The Zouaves could hardly fight another half-hour for sheer fatigue and thirst and hunger. Muttered cries of 'Surrender!' began to be heard here and there from the men. The Fort, in fact, was but a riddled shell; it might fall down bodily about their ears at any moment.

Just then, M. l'Administrateur made his appearance suddenly at the door that led upon the flat white terrace. He was grimed with smoke, and covered with stains of powder or blood.

'I'm going to make terms,' he said shortly.

'*Jamais !*' madame cried, in her shrillest and most authoritative accents, stamping her little foot angrily upon the tiles of the house-top. '*Jamais ! jamais ! mille fois jamais !*'

'We can no longer delay it,' monsieur responded coldly, twirling his moustaches.

'Surrender if you like, but I'll fight till I die, if I hold the Fort myself alone,' madame answered with spirit, seizing the sword at a wrench from the scabbard by his side. 'I shall not be massacred here in cold blood as we were at Palaestro. I shall die blade in hand. For the honour of France, I refuse to surrender.'

'I command this garrison,' monsieur said with dignity.

'And I command *you*,' madame retorted briskly, with her irrepressible street-Arab readiness. 'Go back,' she went on,

in a coaxing tone, pouting her pretty little Parisian lips at him coquettishly. 'Go back, there's a good man, and fight it out like a soldier to the bitter end. If in twenty minutes, twenty minutes by my watch—the little watch you gave me, you remember, Hippolyte—we're not relieved from Fort National or somewhere, *parole d'honneur*, I'll jump down among them myself, all alive, from the parapet. Not a woman in the place shall be taken prisoner. We will save our honour! Death, if you will, but not—not these savages!'

'You are right!' monsieur cried with spirit, taking her hand in his. 'Such women as you teach men how to die. I admire you, Adèle. You show me my duty. We will never surrender. We'll fight them to the end. If they enter this house, it shall be over our bodies.'

Madame, in a sudden burst of unwonted tenderness, stepped forward with a bound, and kissed him roundly.

But Iris held her hands to her ears in horror. They must die where they stood! They must die that day! Die by the sword! There was clearly no help for it!

Unless a relief-party arrived in twenty minutes!

CHAPTER XL.

OUT OF THE HURLY-BURLY.

WHEN the Sisters at Beni-Mansour, after carrying Meriem tenderly to the Rest House, went down with a stretcher into the gorge by the river in search of the dead Kabyle whom they were told to expect there, they found Eustace Le Marchant breathing still, though shattered and insensible from his terrible adventure. At the point where he fell, the sand-bank, by good luck, happened to be soft and very yielding; it had broken his fall as nothing else could have done, and received him gently, as on a natural mattress.

As they laid him on the stretcher, he opened his eyes, and recovering consciousness for a second, remembered everything. Then, the gravity of the crisis supplying him with false strength for the unwonted effort, he cried aloud in French, with a sudden burst of feverish energy:

‘Danger in the hills! Telegraph at once to Tizi-Ouzou and Fort National for aid! St. Cloud’s surrounded. The wires are cut. The Kabyles have risen, and are attacking the Fort. They’ve proclaimed a Jihad. They hold the roads to prevent an alarm. I came down, disguised, over the Col of the Djurjura, to bring word and warn you, and ask for succour.’

Then his strength gave out; he could say no more; he fell back insensible on the pillow of the stretcher.

The startled Sisters carried him off to the Rest House without delay, and laid him on a bed, and tended him tenderly. But before even his first rough needs had begun to be satisfied, two of their number, all trembling with excitement at so important a mission, went off to the little *mairie* of the settlement with the news of the strange tidings brought them in such a providential manner by the unknown, disguised, and wounded European.

Information so serious and so genuinely vouched for could not be disregarded, even by the most severe of French red-tape officials; and before six o’clock in the early morning, therefore, a telegram had reached the post of Tizi-Ouzou:

‘Reported rising of the Kabyles in the Djurjura. St. Cloud surrounded. The garrison in danger. A single European straggled in this morning, having slipped through the lines in native dress, and desperately injured. Send assistance at once to the Fort. Secure approaches.’

The news was not wholly unexpected. Doubts had been raised at Tizi-Ouzou even earlier, owing to the interruption of telegraphic communications, as to the safety of the outlying little garrison at St. Cloud. The wires wouldn’t work; and when the wires won’t work in an occupied country, you may always suspect the possibility at least that somebody somewhere has deliberately cut them.

Nevertheless, as the Commandant afterwards remarked in his official despatch, ‘no serious apprehension was at first entertained, as the Kabyles had exhibited few symptoms of uneasiness during the period immediately preceding the outbreak.’

These thunderbolts, indeed, always fall in Algeria from a clear sky. The utter isolation of native from European life makes it possible for the Arabs or Berbers to plot an insurrection in its minutest details, and that not even with much show of secrecy or concealment, yet without arousing for a moment by word or deed the vigilance of the authorities. The two streams of life flow on together side by side, unrelated. They touch, but they do not mix. Religion, manners, speech, divide them. What the Kabyle thinks or plans or hopes is a sealed book to his next-door neighbour, the European settler.

Hence it came about that at Tizi-Ouzou that night nobody had felt very much alarm at the temporary interruption of telegraphic communication with the mountain posts. Wires are always liable to get wrong anywhere. Their getting wrong excited no sinister suspicion. But as soon as the message from Beni-Mansour arrived, everything was, nevertheless, in readiness for immediate action. Where thunderbolts from a clear sky may be expected at any moment, people live in the perpetual attitude for receiving them like Ajax. In a very few minutes the Zouaves were called out under all arms, a hasty little column turned out with marvellous speed in good order; and with bayonets set and faces on the alert, the hurried relief-party marched steadily up the military road that leads by slow zigzags towards St. Cloud in the mountains.

They marched all morning at a forced pace, seeing more and more signs as they went along their track of the havoc that the Kabyles had wrought that night among the outlying settlements. As they neared St. Cloud, the blackened farms and smouldering ruins on every side told their own tale; they had come, if not too late, not one moment too soon. A massacre had clearly taken place at the Fort, or was on the very eve of taking place, unless they could arrive just in time to relieve it. Here, a smoking oil-mill lay burnt to the ground; there, a settler's cottage stood out with charred walls, and roofless, skeleton timbers; yonder, again, a mutilated corpse on the dusty roadside told how the Kabyles had wreaked their vengeance, with hideous disfigurements, on some inoffensive colonist. One night had sufficed to lay in ashes the result of many years'

active toil—the valley of St. Cloud spread before their eyes one vast scene of sudden and wretched desolation.

On their road, however, they met with little or no opposition. Only on the pass just below the village of the Beni-Merzoug, where Meriem and Eustace had in vain endeavoured to force their way, a strong body of Kabyles held the gorge in force. But a twenty minutes' skirmish with superior arms of precision sufficed to dislodge these ill-equipped foes, and the little column passed on upon its way unmolested to the Col that overhung the St. Cloud valley.

It was there that the full extent of the mischief wrought by the insurgents broke with a flash upon their horrified eyes. As they gazed into the glen, where once the Fort and village gleamed white in the centre, no sign of the settlement seemed for a moment to remain anywhere. All they could make out was a confused mass of living and moving creatures—the swarm of Kabyles, like ants from an ant-hill, surrounding all that remained of the tottering small fortress.

Was St. Cloud itself demolished? Did anything yet remain? Had they come too late to relieve and save that gallant little garrison? Or was there still a remnant left fighting hard to the death against tremendous odds for life and honour and the fair fame of the fatherland?

From the Col they could hardly yet make out for certain; but the frequent shots that echoed through the hills showed that fighting of some sort was still going on. Unless, indeed, the Kabyles were now engaged, after their wont, in massacring the prisoners after a surrender!

The relieving column charged at a double down the slope of the hill, resolved at least to avenge the memory of their slaughtered fellow-countrymen.

In the Fort, meanwhile, affairs had come to the last gasp. Ammunition, wasted like water in that sharp fight, was beginning to give out. It was a question of sabres and bayonets now. Let the rebels come on! They must sell their lives dearly, and then—all would soon be over.

The women, crouched and huddled together in a mass on the hot terrace, were silent at last in mute expectation. Even Madame l'Administratrice found her false courage

fail; she crouched with the rest and uttered not a word, but gazed away to the west with a yearning heart towards the Col of the Beni-Merzoug.

Presently Iris looked up and spoke.

'What's that cloud,' she cried, 'coming over the Col—away yonder on the left? Do you see it? Do you see it? More Kabyles, I suppose. Oh, mother, they'll soon swarm over us!'

Madame shaded her eyes with her hand and looked. For a moment she hesitated. They were hard to make out. She dared not believe her own eyes. Then all at once, in that hour of deliverance, her calmness broke down and her nerve forsook her. The woman within her, so long repressed, and repressed artificially, by that theatrical courage, burst forth with a rush in its natural womanhood. She fell upon Iris's neck, sobbing, with a wild and hysterical flood of tears.

'They're Zouaves!' she cried, flinging her arms madly round her English friend, 'they're Zouaves! I can see them; I can tell the uniform. I can recognise the even red line of march! I can make out the flag! *Nous sommes sauvés, sauvés!*' And she kissed her again and again on both cheeks in a frantic outburst of pent-up feeling.

At the very same instant, along the opposite hill, a second column appeared above the crest, in a cloud of dust, from the direction of Fort National. A cry burst forth with eager energy from all those watching women's lips.

'*Les Chasseurs, les Chasseurs! Mère de Dieu! Nous sommes sauvés.*'

Madame l'Administratrice waved her handkerchief wildly round her head in triumph. With a burst of joy she rushed to the trap-door, and shouted aloud to her husband below.

'Hippolyte! Hippolyte! One minute longer! Hold out for your lives! We shall beat them yet! Two columns are coming. Zouaves and Chasseurs! We have them between two fires. One from Tizi-Ouzou! The other from Fort National!'

A few moments later all was changed as if by magic. On either side a body of trained and drilled French soldiers was charging with fixed bayonets the wearied mob of irregular Kabyles. For a quarter of an hour the din and smoke and turmoil were indescribable. Hideous shrieks

went up to the noonday sky. Short swords were brandished and rifles fired. A frightful *mêlée* of slaughter ensued. Then the noise slowly died out to a few stray shots, and ceased at last. The women on the roof breathed freely once more. The Kabyles were surrounded—disarmed—taken prisoners!

Under the charred remains of the burnt gate, the two commanders of the little relieving columns came up with smiles on their scarred faces, and gave their hands to M. l'Administrateur. M. l'Administrateur, all blood and powder, grasped them warmly with his own left. The right hung limp and idle by his side. The women had crowded down, now their terror was relieved, to welcome their deliverers. Madame l'Administratrice, herself once more, bounded up to kiss both her husband's cheeks openly, *coram populo*.

'Hippolyte,' she cried, with genuine admiration, 'your wife is proud of you! You fought them well. I didn't believe, *mon ami*, you could fight like that! I'm glad we're not licked by these dogs of Kabyles.'

Iris gazed forth, in fear and trembling, for the two among the party who most interested her personally. Was Uncle Tom safe? and—was Mr. Blake not further wounded?

Presently, from the black and grimy mass of humanity by the gate, there disengaged themselves two very dusky, much-torn objects, in the shape of men, but with clothes and features scarcely distinguishable for dirt and tatters. Their faces were ingrained with dust and ashes; their garments were torn; their general appearance was a cross between a sweep and a London scavenger. One wore what had once been an evening suit; but his tie was gone and his shirt-front was far from being spotlessly white. The other had his elbow looped up with a pale blue scarf—Iris's own scarf, fastened round it last evening. It was with a start that she recognised her two brave heroes. How prosaically dirty and hot they looked! The gallant defender would do well as a rule, in fact, if he washed and dressed before presenting himself in person to receive on the spot the thanks and congratulations of rescued beauty.

Uncle Tom 'came up smiling,' however, in spite of everything.

‘My dear,’ he cried, kissing her through all his dirt, ‘I’ve been perfectly astonished. I’d no conception these Frenchmen could fight like devils, as they’ve been doing this morning! By George, Iris, no British Army could have fought more pluckily! But it’s hot work, I can tell you, Amelia, precious hot work; a long sight hotter, for a man of my weight, than even lawn-tennis.’

As for Vernon Blake, it must be candidly admitted that he took a mean advantage of the situation. For, as he grasped Iris’s hand with his own burnt and grimy fingers, by that hard-contested gate, he murmured, so low that only she could hear: ‘And do you still insist, then, I must marry the Kabyle girl?’

CHAPTER XLI.

SINGULAR DISCOVERY AT SIDI AIA.

AT Algiers town, meanwhile, in Dr. Yate-Westbury’s commodious villa on the Mustapha slope, Harold Knyvett found himself in the lap of luxury. With Sidi Aia conveniently next door, for the full development of his recondite plans, and old Sarah delighted to show every attention to Sir Arthur’s nephew and Miss Iris’s cousin (‘God bless her pretty face, the dear young lady!’), the lines had indeed fallen to him in pleasant places. He could endure with equanimity even that old bore Yate-Westbury’s infernal chatter about self-concentration and the origin of insanity, when he knew it all wafted him every day so much the nearer to the accomplishment of his grand scheme for acquiring the estate and bringing Miss Iris down upon her bended knees (metaphorically) before him.

For he loved that woman! He must have that woman! He would humble her in the dust, and then make her marry him!

So he worked in the dark, underground, like a mole, surely and silently.

But the worst of the mole is, it only sees what takes place beneath the surface.

‘I want you to come over with me this afternoon, Yate-Westbury,’ he said at luncheon one day, discounting his

triumph, 'and have a good look round again at those Moorish antiques in my uncle's villa, or, rather, in Iris's. I can't quite make up my mind what I should do with that alcove in the drawing-room—if the house were mine. The point's unimportant, perhaps—unimportant, I admit—considering the purely hypothetical nature of the supposition; but still, as a simple matter of taste, I want to settle it.'

The famous specialist looked him through and through at a single glance with his keen, quick vision. 'Got a remote eye on the heiress, eh?' he said sharply. 'Well, you might do worse for yourself in the end than marry your cousin. A fine girl with a fine property; though I'm never in favour myself, if it comes to that, of consanguineous marriages.'

Harold laughed a short, self-complacent little laugh. 'I'll admit the notion of reuniting the family has sometimes, more or less vaguely, crossed my mind,' he answered, with a satisfied smirk. 'It has many advantages. The girl would suit me, the villa would suit me, and the money would suit me down to the very ground. From several points of view, in fact, a rational man might take the match into his favourable consideration.'

'And the girl?' Dr. Yate-Westbury ventured to ask, with a sudden glance up at him from those searching eyes. 'Might a rational girl take the match into her favourable consideration, too? Would *you* suit her as well as *she* and the villa'd suit you, I wonder?'

Harold drew himself up to his full height, with somewhat offended dignity. These doctor fellows presume altogether too much upon a mere professional and business acquaintance. 'I've no doubt,' he answered, with stony politeness, 'if *I* were to ask my cousin to become my wife, my cousin would advise herself well under the circumstances before *she* rejected me.'

Dr. Yate-Westbury changed the subject at once with medical adroitness. His patient was fumbling away quite too visibly now at that unfortunate button. When a patient gets off on his nervous hobby, the wise physician avoids dangerous ground by diverting his thoughts with a jump upon dexterous side-issues.

'No doubt,' he echoed. 'And the villa's certainly very charming, too. These pretty Moorish things would make

any house beautiful. Did you go in for many purchases in the town this morning? It's a quaint old place, and full of interest, isn't it?

'Why, I hardly knew whether I was standing upon my head or my heels,' Harold answered with truth. 'One's first visit to the East's a perfect revelation. Everything Oriental's so deliciously new. I felt as if Algiers was one huge kaleidoscope, and I was one of the little loose glass pieces rattling about inside it. The colour, the din, the change, the excitement, are all so strange. And yet in a way, too, so curiously familiar! The people and things one has read about from one's childhood! Outside, this is apparently to the naked eye the Nineteenth Century; in the narrow old alleys of the native town, I found myself all at once transported at a bound on some enchanted carpet to the Bagdad of good Haroun-al-Raschid.'

'Did you go into any of the shops?' Yate-Westbury asked, still observing him closely

'Oh yes; rather. Your man Ahmed took me into one in the Rue de la Lyre; Abd-er-Rahman's, he called it; the name alone's worth all the money. I was quite taken aback when I got inside—a dim old Moorish house, you know, with a tiled courtyard and Saracenic arcade, and piles of rich Oriental stuffs lying about loose everywhere, and pierced brass lamps hanging down from the roof, and an abstruse air of the "Arabian Nights" pervading mysteriously all the quaint surroundings.'

'And you bought largely?'

'Bought largely! my dear sir, it's a place to spend thousands in. My first idea, when I turned over those great piles of Algerian embroideries, and Persian saddle-cloths, and Tunisian silks, with my fingers itching, was to telegraph over at once to my lawyer in London, "Sell out everything instanter at close market prices, and forward the proceeds to this address for immediate investment in Oriental needlework!" Yes, I bought a good deal—some Tlemcen rugs, and several nice brass and silver inlaid trays, which I mean to put up over the front arch of the red room—when—when——' and he broke off suddenly.

'When you marry the heiress?' Yate-Westbury suggested, with a meaning smile.

Harold had checked himself with an involuntary start. It was so hard not to anticipate the discovery of the will—that will he himself knew so well already. ‘When I marry the heiress,’ he repeated mechanically. ‘Yes, yes, of course, when I marry the heiress.’ And that unlucky button twisted round and round with infinite twirls in his tremulous fingers, till it was in imminent danger of breaking away from its moorings bodily.

‘I like the way they do business here,’ he went on with an effort, trying to appear at his ease once more, and to talk with his usual glib Pall Mall readiness. ‘I like the quaint flavour of antique life about the fat impassive old Moor in the embroidered jacket who keeps the bazaar, and puffs his cigarette in a dignified repose that seems to imply customers and telegraphs and price-lists are not. My friend Abd-er-Rahman, in fact, conducts affairs even now in the stately old style of the one-eyed calender, when time was not yet money, nor were merchants shopkeepers; when to buy a brass tray was a commercial treaty between two high contracting parties, and to chaffer for a lamp or an embroidered *portière* was a diplomatic event to be duly solemnized by prayer and festivities.’

‘And you got what you wanted?’ Yate-Westbury asked again curiously.

Harold’s mouth twitched with a more nervous twitch than ever as he replied, in a studied mock-careless tone, ‘Oh, that key; yes—to the singular drawer in my uncle’s davenport, you mean. Ah, of course, I remember. Well, I’m not quite sure. I hunted up a bundle of skeleton keys at the *serrurier’s* in the town, and I dare say one of them may happen to fit it. But it’s not of much consequence whether it does or not, thank you. I’ve no right, indeed—except as a cousin—to go poking about Iris’s house in her absence. Still, it’s queer nobody should ever have noticed that drawer in the davenport. My uncle told me he always kept his most important papers there.’ And as he spoke, the button at last came fairly off in his irrepressible fingers.

After lunch, they lighted their cigars and strolled out upon the lawn, and Harold drew on his seemingly unsuspecting companion by casual side-paths towards the garden-gate of Sidi Aia. The doctor followed with suspicious eyes.

They walked up the drive and into the central hall. There Harold began pointing out the various places in the house and grounds where he would effect sundry alterations and improvements of his own 'if the property were his,' and to fiddle in between whiles with his bunch of keys at the rusty old locks of that recalcitrant davenport. How he hugged himself on the cleverness with which he had already concealed within it the—well, the other will, and then made Yate-Westbury, willy-nilly, an unconscious accomplice in the act of finding it!

'They'll none of them fit!' he cried at last, flinging the bunch away from him in a pretended ill-temper. 'After all, it's no business of mine to look. Iris can try, if she cares to investigate, when she comes down from the mountains.'

He knew already that Yate-Westbury prided himself not a little upon his mechanical skill and delicacy of wrist. 'Let me have a try,' the doctor said, taking the keys quite unobtrusively from the table where Harold had flung them. 'A gentle twist often succeeds in these cases where strength and violence are thrown away to no purpose.'

'You can try if you like, but they won't fit,' Harold answered pettishly, suppressing his anxiety, and feeling with vague fingers for the abolished button.

Thus challenged to the trial, and put upon his mettle, Yate-Westbury began with the bunch systematically, and pushed each key in, one after the other, till he came to the original identical skeleton that Harold had added to the ring in the solitude of his own room just before luncheon.

It turned in the lock without the slightest difficulty, as well it might, seeing that the wards and blanks of each had been fitted to the other from the very beginning.

Yate-Westbury pulled out the slide entire. It was a queer little drawer—a secret drawer—stuck inconspicuously at one side of the davenport, and with its lock concealed by an obtrusive piece of ornamental brasswork. Nobody knew of its existence, indeed, save only Harold, who had bought this very davenport of set purpose a year or two before at a shop in Wardour Street, and sent it over to Algiers as a present to his uncle, with the acute idea that such a receptacle might happen some day, in case of an emergency, to come in handy. He had locked the drawer and kept the

key himself as a measure of precaution, lest anything alien should ever get into it. So deep and long beforehand had he provided against contingencies. He prided himself not a little in that moment of triumph on his extraordinary prudence and his judicious forethought.

The specialist sat down in an easy-chair in the corner, and began to inspect at his leisure the contents of the drawer.

‘What have you there, doctor?’ Harold asked banteringly, with assumed carelessness. ‘Gold and silver and precious stones? The wealth of Ormuz and of Ind, I suppose. Or is it only Sir Arthur’s youthful love-letters and other waste-paper?’

‘Bills,’ Yate-Westbury answered, turning over the papers loosely with his incautious hand, ‘bills, bills—mostly receipted.’

And so they were. For Harold had been at the pains to acquire, by purchase, a large number of those incidental accompaniments from his uncle’s valet, all dated Aix, to give greater *vraisemblance* to the discovery of the will.

‘Nothing more than that?’ Harold asked, with clever and well-assumed disappointment. ‘I expected at least a great Hoggarty Diamond!’

‘Nothing more than that,’ the doctor responded cheerfully. ‘*Pour acquit* on every one of them. . . Stop. Here, what’s this! That looks rather more promising. “Will of Major-General Sir Arthur Wellesley Knyvett, K.C.B.” Whew—I say! Here’s the old gentleman’s last will and testament.

Why, this can’t be the will they proved in London. What was the date of that one, I wonder? This concerns you, Knyvett! You’d better look into it.’

Harold came over with affected nonchalance, his fingers twitching horribly none the less all the while, and the corners of his mouth quivering hard with excitement. He looked over Yate-Westbury’s shoulder as the doctor read. The great specialist whistled low and long to himself as he saw the terms of the strangely-recovered document. ‘By Jove!’ he cried, looking up, ‘this is luck for you, Knyvett: “Revoke all former wills absolutely, and leave my entire estate, real and personal, without remainder, to my dutiful nephew, Harold Knyvett, of the Board of Trade, London, Esquire” . . . Then, my dear fellow—there’s no mistake

about it—you're the owner of Sidi Aia yourself, after all. Upon my soul, I congratulate you—I congratulate you !'

In the triumph of the moment, the room swam round about Harold Knyvett's brain. His plot had succeeded—succeeded to the letter ! Everything had turned out exactly as he intended ! Yate-Westbury, not he, had found the missing will. No tinge of suspicion would ever now attach to his name. Not even that old fool, Tom Whitmarsh himself, could find any flaw in the wording or the attestation—all had been done in strict accordance with the simplest and most indisputable forms laid down in Lord St. Leonard's excellent little hand-book. He felt himself already the monarch of all he surveyed at Sidi Aia. He had Iris at his feet ! She must marry him or be beggared !'

For a minute he could hardly gasp out in jerks a few inarticulate words to the doctor, ' You'd better keep it. You found it, not I. It must be duly proved, and all that sort of thing. Till then, it should remain in your possession.'

' A worse thing to have happened to him, in his frame of mind,' Yate-Westbury said to his assistant that night, as they sat alone together in his little consulting-room, ' I can hardly imagine. Whether he forged it or whether he found it doesn't much matter. In either case, the episode's deplorable—simply deplorable. He was on the very verge of acute dementia, even before the will turned up. This miserable excitement will upset everything. And now, no doubt, he'll come into the property a raving lunatic.'

CHAPTER XLII.

PRETENCE OR REALITY ?

IN the dead of night—of that same awful night—Harold Knyvett lay upon his bed awake, and heard the clock on Yate-Westbury's stairs clang out the hours, one by one, monotonously. A dreary old clock, with a cracked voice. So long and terrible a twenty-four hours he had never known ; they dragged their slow length with relentless deliberation. His accomplished crime was beginning already its Nemesis upon him.

One of Yate-Westbury's patients kept him awake—a poor mad woman, chattering and moaning.

Weary at last with much tossing and turning, he rose up, and looked out of the little Moorish arcaded window. The moonlight was pouring, in full pale-green floods, on the white walls and flat roofs of Sidi Aia next door—*his* house, his own house, which he had procured for himself by his own wise forethought and his own clever handicraft. That bad old man, Sir Arthur (confound him for a coward!), had never had the courage to do the right thing, and to make a plain will, in accordance with common honesty and friendliness and justice. But never mind; he, Harold Knyvett, had taken the matter boldly in hand, like a man of mettle, and shrunk not from the terrors of the law, or the common-places of morality, in his determination that substantial right should at last be done him. With infinite skill and patience and boldness, out of the nettle Danger had he plucked for himself the flower Safety.

The moonlight played exquisitely upon those high white walls of Sidi Aia. The shadows of the arches came out by contrast in delicate tones of faint green; the capitals of the pillars gleamed bright and beautiful with silvery radiance. Anything more lovely in its way he had never seen. So romantic, so poetical, so fit for himself and Iris to live in: for the intoxication of love (or what answered to it in Harold Knyvett's nature) was mixed now in his brain with the meaner intoxication of accomplished villainy. And it was all his—his; he had secured it for himself; he had carved his own fortune with his own bold hand; he had made himself, at one blow, rich, unassailable, much to be envied.

Happy, happy, happy Harold! Rich, unassailable, much to be envied.

But sleep he could not, for all his wealth. The excitement had driven away drowsiness from his eyelids. He lay down once more on his bed uneasily, and tried to escape from the flood of thought that inundated his consciousness with teeming images. His brain whirled round and round in a fever of thinking. He must repeat something over and over again to calm and appease that internal whirlwind. He must say A B C a hundred times over, according to the

old formula, or picture to himself sheep leaping over a gate, or count his fingers till he was tired and drowsy! All, all, alas! of no avail! A B C became to him a romantic tune, and set itself mentally to an air of Mendelssohn's. The sheep that leaped over the gate figured themselves vividly as individual pictures, in every conceivable ovine variety of fleece and attitude. The ends of his fingers as he counted them to himself seemed instinct with extraordinary and unnatural sensitiveness—too much alive, he somehow imagined, like his brain itself, which was working too hard for the fibres that composed it.

And then, in a vague, dreamy, unrelated way, he thought of those words Yate-Westbury was fond of repeating so often—Yate-Westbury, with his odious professional habit of regarding all mankind as potential lunatics. 'Madmen live a great deal too fast; their nervous system burns itself out at the rate of three days in the twenty-four hours.'

Not that he for one moment applied them to himself. He merely recollected them in a dreamy way as an apt illustration of his present state. He was so excited and overwrought with this one absorbing plan of action that his mind, too, like the madman's, in spite of its clearness, was working too fast and working too vividly. Images and ideas crowded in upon him with wild haste one after the other. He saw and heard and felt and thought with abnormal keenness and intensity of sensation.

Not, again, that he was insane, or anything like it. Oh no, indeed! He had never thought things out more logically or consecutively in his life. He was, if anything, saner than usual—perfectly collected, sensible, clear-headed. Ideas came to him now with a force and directness they had never before in his life possessed. He could see through a brick wall, so piercing was his vision. No clouds or mists obscured his mental sight. And he was brilliant, too—undeniably brilliant. He thought he could write poetry in his present mood—he, who had hitherto despised it as mere sentimentality. At any rate, he talked all day long yesterday, with that pompous old fool for sole hearer, as he had never before talked in the most sparkling drawing-rooms of London society. As a rule, one requires an audience to stimulate one. But not so now. Such point, such repartee,

such wit, such scintillations! He had fairly astonished himself throughout the day by his own perfect fluency and flashes of inspiration.

Yet somehow he wished to goodness he could only get Yate-Westbury's perpetual small-talk out of his head this evening. That man's stock remarks seemed to dog and haunt him.

'You need never be afraid of going mad,' the fellow said, 'if you think you're going mad. It's when you feel yourself sanest that you're most in danger. People in the incipient stages of insanity always flatter themselves that never in their lives were they so lucid and coherent. They mistake the perfect clearness and vividness of their morbid impressions for exceptional soundness and sobriety of thought. They imagine themselves cleverest when they're really maddest.'

Hang it all! Would the man never get off his horrid hobby-horse? What could be more depressing to a sane person—such as himself—than this incessant harping upon the symptoms of insanity! Do we all of us want to be always mad-hunting?

But oh for a sleep! for a moment's sleep! How his eyelids burned and tingled and smarted! So rich, so successful, and yet no sleep! The words roused a latent chord in his memory.

'Sleep, gentle sleep, nature's soft nurse, how have I frightened thee?' How well he remembered learning those lines long ago at Winchester! It was on a half-remedy afternoon, he recollected as distinctly as if it were yesterday; and he took out the book with him to Moab to learn his piece (they called it Moab because it was the lavatory, and 'Moab is my wash-pot'); and the Prefect of the Tub caught him sneaking away there, and sent him back with the book whimpering to his scob. How near it all seemed! how vivid! how life-like!

And then his imagination wandered off once more by devious tracks to those old Winchester days in all their freshness. So many little things crowded back on his memory. He remembered how he had chiselled the Prefect of the Hall out of half a crown one day, on a transaction in stamps, by selling him an inferior woodcut imitation,

removed from a catalogue, for a Hawaiian two-cent; and how the Prefect, when he found out the ingenious fraud, had made him eat the catalogue entire, to the distinct imperilment of his previous digestion. Paper is so very, very innutritious! He remembered how the Posers came down from Oxford on the Tuesday after St. Thomas's Day; and how they were greeted *ad portas* with a Latin oration by the senior scholars; and how he himself had sent in a first copy of verses to the Posers which secured him the Exhibition; and how, being uncertain about the gender of *restis*, he had written the adjective intended to agree with its accusative in so doubtful a way that you might make it either *validum* or *validam*, according to the taste or fancy of the reader. At *viva voce*, the Poser handed him the paper across the table and asked him severely in a stern voice for which it was meant; and Harold, having settled the point artfully with the dictionary meanwhile, answered in accordance with his later knowledge—of course, in a surprised tone, so winning the Exhibition by his cuteness from that dull fellow, Parker, who had fallen into exactly the self-same trap, but had written so plainly (like a fool as he was) that the Poser never hesitated for a moment to detect his error. Parker was always a poor spiritless creature. He was slaving now on a hundred a year as a curate in Hampshire, while he, Harold, by his energy and skill, was the master of Sidi Aia and a splendid fortune!

Parker's scob was 270. 'Scob' was 'box' in Winchester slang. The paint was worn on the left-hand side. It was gnawed a bit on the cover within by a white mouse that Parker tried to keep there for a pet without the knowledge of the commoners.

And then, in a horrible burst of revelation, those words of Yate-Westbury's, in his 'Treatise on the Diseases of the Nervous System,' came back to him with a rush: 'The patient exhibits a remarkable tendency in these sleepless periods to dwell with minute and exaggerated detail upon long-past events or childish reminiscences. This symptom in particular I regard as peculiarly indicative of approaching insanity: when coupled with a twitching of the fingers and involuntary movements of the lips or facial muscles, it is almost diagnostic of the incipient stages of acute dementia.'

Acute dementia! Acute dementia! Acute dementia! With a flash of recognition, in an agony of terror, he saw it all. He recognised the inevitable. For the first time in his life he realized, at one blow, the hideous fact that the symptoms he had been simulating, or thought himself simulating, were all at bottom really there. The twitching of the mouth, the nervous movement of the hands and fingers, the forgetfulness of names, of words, of phrases, the intense recollection of childish scenes! Great heavens, it was horrible, incredible, but true! It was no pretence, but a solemn reality! He was going mad with success—with selfish triumph—with self-centred complacency!

Yate-Westbury's mad people were chattering up above there! The idea flashed across him now with a horrible vividness: he himself was only one of Yate-Westbury's mad people!

Then, for a single second, in a sudden outburst of inspired self-revelation, as by an electric spark, the whole naked truth of his own ingrained nature came home to him all at once in all its vulgar and sordid hideousness. He was, indeed, just such a man as Yate-Westbury pictured his ideal type of the insane temperament—cold, selfish, unfeeling, narrow; incapable of expansive or sympathetic thought; careless of the good or ill of others; pursuing to the end with relentless calmness his own personal schemes for his own personal aggrandisement. Not often is it given us in a moment of truth to see ourselves for an indivisible fraction of time in the vivid light of an awakened inner sense; but to Harold Knyvett one of those rare moments occurred just then among the paroxysms of insanity in the night watches. For one lucid second he knew himself mad; he knew himself bad; he knew himself mean; he knew himself worthless. He had wrought his own illwill in his own vile way, and now he would be opulent, wealthy, a lord, a king—in a madhouse!

They could never take it away from him, even in a madhouse. Come what might, he had at least humbled that girl Iris's pride, and checkmated that meddling old fool Whitmarsh. He had earned it all with his own right hand! The property was his—were it only in a madhouse!

Was it worth going through so much to win so little?

‘What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?’ And Harold Knyvett had lost his own soul, in the most literal sense—ruined his intellect—destroyed his reason!

He knew it, he felt it, in a revulsion of horror. If he could, he would have burnt that vile forgery to ashes that one remorseful moment. But he couldn’t—he couldn’t. Yate-Westbury had found it—Yate-Westbury was keeping it! Yate-Westbury was the guardian of that damning paper!

For hours he lay there and tossed in agony. Mad, mad! he knew it. How horrible! how ghastly!

The other mad people were chattering upstairs. Sidi Aia would now be only his asylum.

Slowly the morning dawned once more—that morning that dawned on Eustace and Meriem among the Djurjura slopes, on Vernon Blake and Iris in the beleaguered fortress. The light broke pink over the snow-clad mountains in the dim distance. Harold Knyvett fell asleep of pure fatigue. In his dreams, he dreamt of Sidi Aia and riches.

When he woke again the spell was broken. Daylight brings far other thoughts in its train. He laughed at his fears. Mad! he was never more sensible in his life. A little nervous twitching in his fingers, no doubt: but who wouldn’t be nervous at such a crisis? Even if the symptoms were a trifle uncanny—and he didn’t deny he was somewhat excited—he would fight against them hard, and battle them down like a man, if necessary. It is not good for man to live alone—Yate-Westbury always advised marriage; and when he was married to Iris at last, why, Iris would keep him straight and sane enough. A beautiful wife, and a splendid fortune! Mad, indeed, says Yate-Westbury! Fool, dolt, pig, idiot!

CHAPTER XLIII.

REVOLUTION.

In the Rest House at Beni-Mansour the good Grey Sisters did their best after the accident for Eustace Le Marchant. His wounds, indeed, were less severe than might at first

have been anticipated, for it was rather the mere force of the concussion that had rendered him insensible for the time being than any distinct internal injury. Thanks to the softness of the sand and the position in which he fell, no bones were broken. He was weak and shaken with his terrible jolting, to be sure, but not in any way permanently disabled.

For an hour or two he lay unconscious on the bed where the sisters placed him; then, about mid-day, he opened his eyes, with a start, once more, and asked feebly in French:

‘Where’s Meriem?’

The sisters understood at once whom he meant.

‘Hush,’ one of them said, smoothing his pillow gently; ‘you mustn’t talk yet. You’re far too weak for that. Mademoiselle’s in the next room. She’s seriously hurt, but not, we hope, in any immediate danger.’

They took it for granted that Meriem, too, was a European, merely disguised in Kabyle dress for purposes of safety.

‘Seriously hurt!’ Eustace repeated with a gasp, raising himself all at once on his elbows in the bed. ‘Seriously hurt! Why, what on earth has happened? She didn’t get in the way of the train, then, did she?’

‘She ran along the line, flinging up her arms in vain to attract attention, for fear the engine should run over you,’ the sister answered; and the train knocked her down, though it did not crush her. But you must be quiet now. We can’t allow you to talk any more at present.’

Eustace threw himself back, and lay quiet for awhile with the greatest difficulty. He was burning to know how Meriem got on. He wanted to see her, to assure himself of her safety. But the sisters put him off from time to time with the formal report, ‘She’s doing very well, but not yet conscious. You must leave these things to us who understand them. The doctor expects her, with care, to recover.’

Oh, but the hours seemed painfully long to wait, with Meriem in danger so close at hand; and with no possibility of getting up to go to her! Yet it was some sad comfort to Eustace even to think it was for his sake she had braved that danger. For his sake? Well, perhaps not entirely that! Nay, for Vernon’s, in the end, since upon

Eustace's safety depended the chance of relieving St. Cloud, and so saving Iris and Vernon.

Yet for the time being he would lay that flattering unction to his soul, and believe it was partly for his sake she threw herself so bravely before the approaching engine. He knew he would have braved far more himself for her sake any day.

The hours moved on, wearily, wearily.

At last, towards nightfall, a sound of talking! He raised himself up in the bed and listened. Through the open door between the rooms, a faint voice came from Meriem's bedside.

'Can anyone speak English?' it murmured plaintively.

A great joy throbbed through Eustace Le Marchant's soul. It was Meriem's voice; thin and weak, but Meriem's. His heart leaped up into his mouth for delight! Thank Heaven, she was safe! she was once more conscious!

'I can, just a leetle,' one sister replied with a pretty French twang. 'What is it zat you want? Some drink? some water?'

The answer drove him wild with delight and astonishment.

'Is Eustace safe?' Meriem cried out eagerly. 'The man on the bridge. You know who I mean. Did he get across all right? Did the train run over him?'

Eustace's heart gave one wild bound. 'Is Eustace safe?' were the first words she uttered! He could hardly believe his ears for joy. What could be the meaning of so much anxiety? It was *he* she first asked for; himself, not Vernon. His cup was full. It was *he* who came nearest to her heart that moment.

'No, he is not dead,' the sister answered gently, in a soothing voice. 'He has fallen from ze bridge upon soft ground underneas. He is shaken by ze fall, and much hurted. But he has no limb broken, we find, and he has not any danger.'

'Thank God!' Meriem cried. 'Where is he? Where is he?'

'In ze next room, close by,' the sister answered, with a warning inflection. 'But you must not go to him, my dear; you are much too sick. He is your brother, zen, is he?'

'Oh no!' Meriem answered, with her mountain frankness; 'he's not my brother. He's only a friend—a very dear friend. But I want to see him—I want to see him, oh, ever so badly!'

Her words sounded stranger and stranger in his ears. Eustace could hardly take it all in. So much thought for him, so little for Vernon!

There was a second's pause, then Meriem spoke once more.

'Is there news from St. Cloud?' she asked anxiously. 'Have they relieved the Fort there?'

'We know nozzing for certain yet,' the sister answered, with patient gentleness. 'We must wait and learn; it is long to hear. Ze Maire has telegraphed zis morning to Tizi-Ouzou to send assistance, and since zat time we heard nozzing. You have friends at St. Cloud, perhaps? You have brozzers zere?—parents?'

'No,' Meriem answered once more, with her direct simplicity, 'but very dear friends—a cousin and a lover.'

Eustace's heart sank down again to zero. Yet what else on earth could he possibly have expected? Her interest in him was natural enough, of course; he was the last person she had seen before her accident—the one most recently left in direst danger. But that was all. He was only a friend. Vernon, her lover, was still first favourite.

The doors throughout the Rest House were all kept open (hot-climate fashion), as in almost all Algerian houses, and the conversation in the next room was as distinctly audible to him as if it had taken place at his own bedside.

Meriem seemed to fling herself back on her pillow.

'Well,' she said aloud, but half musing to herself, 'if Eustace is safe, I shall die happy.'

'Zen he is a lover, too, is he?' the sister asked quaintly, with that not-ungraceful curiosity into the affairs of the heart which all her kind often display towards that side of life they have deliberately abandoned.

'Well, a very dear friend,' Meriem answered with emotion. 'I don't know how to call it. A *very* dear friend. I *must* get up and see him at once. I really must. Oh, do, please, let me get up now to visit him!'

'No, no,' the sister answered; 'you must lie where you are. I cannot let you get up just now. It is against our rule. We do not allow ze patients to move. You must not see him.'

For a long, long time nothing more was said. Only the sound of deep breathing could be heard. At last Meriem broke the silence once more.

'I wish we could hear from St. Cloud,' she said eagerly. 'I wonder whether Vernon's safe, and Iris—— And my uncle. If I save one, I may lose the other.'

'Zen you have an uncle at St. Cloud?' the sister asked, with interest.

'No, not at St. Cloud,' Meriem answered simply. 'That is to say, not in the Fort, at least. Among the other party. He's gone there to fight against the Christians, you know. He's a Kabyle, of course. He's the Amine of the Beni-Merzoug.'

Eustace fairly laughed in his bed with amusement at the voice of horror in which the good sister ejaculated:

'To fight against ze Christians! Your uncle a Kabyle! Ze Amine of ze Beni-Merzoug! *Mon Dieu, quel horreur!* Zen you are not of our side—you are not an English-woman!'

'No,' Meriem replied, 'or, at least, only half one. I speak English, but I'm Algerian born. My mother was a Kabyle, and I've lived all my life up yonder on the Djur-jura.'

'And him? Ze gentleman zat fell on ze bridge—ze one zat talk such perfect French—he is not Kabyle, he, too? He is a true European?'

'He's an Englishman,' Meriem said. 'A real Englishman. And I *must* see him! Oh, tell me how he is! Let me get up this minute. I must, must see him!'

Eustace could stand the restraint no longer.

'Meriem,' he cried out, in a voice that trembled and quivered for joy, 'I'm alive! I'm here! I shall be all right soon. *I'm* not hurt. There's nothing much the matter with me.'

At the sound of that voice, that tremulous voice, Meriem rose from her bed, uncontrollable now, and breaking into a sudden torrent of tears, rushed wildly towards the place

whence the words came. With one flood of emotion she burst into the room, and flung herself, in a paroxysm of joy and delight, upon Eustace's bosom.

'Eustace,' she cried, in her uncontrolled passion, before that wondering sister, 'Eustace, I'm so glad! I'm so pleased! I'm so happy! Oh, Eustace, how could I ever have thought as I did? I see it, I see it all clearly now. It's come home to me with a burst. I know my own heart. Oh, Eustace, Eustace! I love you! I love you!'

The Englishman's eyes were brimmed with tears. He brushed them away hastily with the Kabyle dress which he still wore.

'Meriem,' he cried, pressing her close to his breast, 'this is too much joy. Tell me how it has all come about. Tell me all, Meriem.'

The Kabyle girl signed with her hand to the sister to go. The sister, wondering and doubting, wiped her own bright eyes, just dimmed by most unprofessional moisture, and went regretfully, for she would fain have lingered. Then Meriem gave free vent to her happiness once more. She knelt down on the floor by Eustace's bedside, and cried silent tears of joy and gratitude to see that he was alive and so little injured.

'Meriem,' Eustace said again, 'tell me what this all means. How . . . have you so soon forgotten Vernon?'

Meriem flung her arms desperately around his neck in her transport.

'Vernon!' she cried, 'Vernon! who talks so of Vernon? What made me ever think so much of that man, I wonder? As I stood there this morning, waiting to see you cross the bridge, and that horrible, roaring, devouring thing came rushing headlong down the hill to destroy you, it burst upon me all like a flash of lightning, how mistaken I'd been, and how foolish, and how wicked! I said to myself, "Oh, God! what have I done? Have I risked his life, Eustace's life, that precious life, for such a man as Vernon? Why, he's worth ten thousand like Vernon Blake, and he loves me as Vernon could never love anyone. And I love him, too, though I never suspected it. Love him deep down in the depths of my heart! I'd give my life up this moment

freely, if only I could save my Eustace, my Eustace." And then, before the hateful thing could come down and crush me, I remembered everything—all—all—like a flash; it seemed to come across me in a rush, like fire, how good you'd been to me, and how kind and thoughtful, and how forgetful of yourself, and how anxious for my happiness. And I said to myself, "Oh, if only I can save his life to-day, I'll tell him I shall be his wife before this evening's over." And I've told you now, Eustace, for I love you! I love you! And she flung herself passionately once more upon his shoulder.

'And then?' Eustace asked, in an ecstasy of delight, but repressing himself firmly.

'And then the great thing came rolling and roaring and hissing above me, and I know nothing more, except that I loved you and hoped I'd been in time to stop it and save you.'

Eustace's eyes were too blind to see, but he drew that beautiful girl's face down to his lips with one hard embrace, and kissed her full rich mouth, with eager fire, a hundred times over. For that moment he would have risked ten thousand bridges. His heart was full; he had found the desire of many days; Meriem was his, and he was Meriem's.

'And only a Kabyle girl!' said the scandalized sisters, as they peeped, in hushed awe, round the desecrated doorway.

CHAPTER XLIV.

MISSING.

THEY sat there long, hand clasped in hand, silently. They needed no words to tell their tale of love to one another. There are moments when silence is the profoundest eloquence. The English tongue is a very fine instrument of rational thought; but a pressure, a thrill, speak the soul's own language far better than the English tongue can speak it.

Meriem's heart was one vast sea of wonder. Now that the truth had flashed upon her so vividly, so intensely, she couldn't herself understand how on earth she had so long managed to go astray and miss it. Eustace was a better

man by far than Vernon—nearer to herself, truer, nobler, worthier of her. As she fled backward before the face of that rushing engine in the gray morning, she had seen it all, as one often sees to the very centre and core of things in a great crisis. That night of despair in the mountain-snow, that morning of peril and agony on the bridge of the railway, had opened her eyes to his real tenderness and her real devotion. The danger she had braved for him made her love him. She bent over his hand now and kissed it fervently. She was ashamed of her blindness. That vivid picture of Eustace in deadly peril on the bridge had roused her with a flash to the consciousness of his worth. She knew she had chosen the better man. Her heart was glad, but it beat too high for one who has just escaped so pressing a danger.

She put up her hand to her breast, instinctively, to lull it. With a sudden thrill, it struck her that a familiar touch was wanting. Day and night, she had known it there so long.

‘My charm!’ she cried, feeling about her bare neck for that well-known trinket. But she didn’t find it. The chain and box and pendants were gone. Her face grew pale with a terrified pallor. ‘Oh, Eustace!’ she burst out, in an agony of fear, ‘I’ve lost them! I’ve lost them! What on earth’s become of them?’

Eustace looked at her neck close, and saw a deep red mark pressed into the throat on the left side. It was the spot where the fastening of the chain had evidently been driven by main force against the collar-bone.

‘I think, Meriem,’ he said, ‘the charm must have been wrenched off by a wheel of the locomotive, or caught in the engine when the train passed over you. It’s lucky, indeed, it was only that, and that it gave so readily. If it had been your dress that caught, you’d have been hurled on the rails and mangled terribly. You must have fallen, with a very light fall, full in front of the engine, flush between the rails, and the locomotive must just have knocked you down, or barely grazed you, and then passed over you without hurting you any further.’

Meriem burst into tears once more.

‘Yusuf put it on,’ she cried, in sore distress; ‘it was

Yusuf's last present. I loved it for Yusuf. . . But that's not all. If it's lost, Eustace, somebody else may perhaps find it; and if it were ever to get into bad hands—for instance, those of that wicked cousin of Iris's that Iris told me about—I can't tell you what mischief might come in the end of it.'

Eustace laughed a merry laugh at her childish superstition, as he naturally thought it.

'My dear Meriem,' he answered, with a smile of superior wisdom he could hardly repress, 'you don't really believe your charms so potent that Iris's cousin could make witchcraft against her with it, do you? What on earth has your locket got to do with Iris's cousin?'

Meriem looked back at him with a scared face.

'It's not witchcraft,' she answered, in all seriousness; 'it's the use he'd make of it—the things he'd find in it. Oh, Eustace, I won't tell you just now, I think, but perhaps—perhaps some day I'll tell you. We must find that charm, whatever happens. I wouldn't for worlds have it lost or mislaid, or let it get into that bad man's hands. He could use it to do so much harm to Iris.'

Eustace fancied he could guess her meaning vaguely, but refrained from asking any questions for the present.

All the rest of that day Meriem remained in a most uneasy frame of mind about the loss of the locket, and was eager to be allowed to go out and hunt for it. That course, however, the professional nursing instinct of the sisters most emphatically vetoed, and she was forced to obey them by mere powerlessness. Early next morning, tidings arrived of the relief of St. Cloud; but the news that Iris and Vernon were safe only seemed to increase Meriem's anxiety as to her lost trinket.

'The very first moment you're well enough, Eustace,' she said many times over, with great earnestness, 'we must go out and hunt up and down the line for Yusuf's locket.'

Still they were happy days for Meriem, those days at the Rest House, in spite of the terrible dribblets of news which came in to them slowly from time to time of the desperate fighting and repulse in the mountains. Many of Meriem's childish friends had been killed in the action, as she learnt by degrees; while the Amine himself, the ringleader of the

revolt, with Hussein, Ahmed, and the Beni-Merzoug marabout, had fled to the South to the free nomad tribes on the border of the desert, where they were practically safe from French intervention. But the more Meriem heard of that awful outbreak, the less and less did the Kabyles seem to her mind like her own people.

‘I can go away with you ever so much more easily now, Eustace,’ she said one day, as she listened with a face of horror to the ghastly details of the massacre he translated to her from the *Dépêches Algériennes*, while he lay on his sofa by the open window. ‘I have no part with them left. I would never live among those wicked people. It would have killed me with shame if my tribesmen had killed Vernon and Iris.’

‘Then you won’t be afraid to come with me to England?’ Eustace asked, half doubtful.

Meriem folded her hands meekly.

‘Whenever you like, Eustace,’ she said, with that perfect trustfulness a true woman reposes in the man who has once succeeded in winning her heart from her.

There was a little pause. Then Meriem said again, leaning over him close, ‘You know you’re marrying only a poor penniless Kabyle girl, Eustace, don’t you? I’ve renounced all claim to the property of that great soldier who died. I promised that much to Iris that day at Beni-Merzoug, and I won’t go back upon it now—not even for your sake, Eustace.’

Eustace smiled a quiet smile of acquiescence.

‘I know that well, dearest,’ he answered, taking her hand in his. ‘I shall love you all the better if I can work for you always, and feel you owe everything you have in the world to me. Let Miss Knyvett keep her money to herself. She and Vernon have more need of it than you and I will have.’

Meriem pressed his hand tenderly with naïve frankness. She had never learnt the coquetry or the reserves of our civilized wooing. Her heart spoke out its own language freely.

‘Then some day,’ she said, ‘I shall tell you why I must find the missing locket. You can guess, perhaps; but I don’t understand it all even myself. I only know that if that bad man were ever to get it, he might do more harm than I can tell to Iris.’

As she spoke, Eustace took up the *Dépêches* he had been holding in his hand loosely by his side with a cry of astonishment. A name in its columns had riveted his attention on a casual side-glance.

‘Why, Meriem,’ he exclaimed, in blank wonder, ‘the man’s in Algiers! He’s stopping this minute at a house at Mustapha—the very place, you know, where Miss Knyvett has her villa. See here, it just caught my eye by pure accident as I happened to look down. “Visitors’ List.” That’s it. “Villa Rossini, Mustapha: Harold Knyvett, Esq., Dr. F Yate-Westbury.”’

‘What does it mean?’ Meriem asked, in vague wonder.

‘It means mischief, I’m sure,’ Eustace answered slowly. ‘It means he’s in Algiers. The man’s come over here, you may be perfectly certain, to juggle the estate away from Miss Knyvett.’

Meriem rose up in a paroxysm of alarm. ‘Can you get up, Eustace?’ she asked eagerly. ‘We *must* go out. We *must* go and find dear Yusuf’s locket.’

How English she was, after all, in her heart! She had never cared but for three men in all her life, and all three were Englishmen. The Kabyle was but the outer husk; the heart and core were English of the English.

Eustace rose from his sofa and hobbled out to help her. With trembling steps they walked down the ravine, and across a small ford one of the sisters showed them to the scene of the accident. Eustace went down on his knees upon the line by that well-remembered spot, and hunted long and earnestly for the missing locket. Not a trace could he find of it anywhere about. At last, by the very sleeper where Meriem had been knocked down, he discovered on the ground, by diligent search, two wrenched and broken links of a silver chain. The locket itself, then, must have been carried on further. Encouraged by this clue, they descended the abrupt ravine once more, and searched the dry space beneath the bridge with all eagerness and care; but not a sign of the charm could they discover anywhere. If it had dropt in the centre and fallen into the river, it must have been swept away long since, no doubt, by the rushing torrent. At last, Eustace sat down on the bank wearied and despairing.

‘It’s lost,’ he said, in a very despondent voice. ‘Gone altogether, and left no traces, Meriem.’

A sudden thought flashed across Meriem’s brain.

‘Eustace,’ she cried, seizing his arm hurriedly, ‘the men on the engine went back for me with their carriage, and brought me across the bridge in the train, you remember. I wonder if they could have taken it off my neck on purpose? Do you think they’d have stolen it? Do you think they’d have kept it?’

‘We might make inquiries,’ Eustace answered, with a sigh, not over-hopeful of this new and forlorn clue. ‘But I don’t suppose, if there was anything of any value to anyone in the locket, they’d be particularly likely to give it up. We might offer a reward, of course: the thing in itself—to anybody but you, I mean, Meriem—would be worth a few francs at the outside as a mere trinket. For half a napoleon they’d probably be glad to give it back again.’

That sum was untold wealth to Meriem, but she didn’t pause in her anxiety just then to notice it.

‘Oh, do you think,’ she said, in a tone of deep distress, ‘do you think, Eustace, they’d be likely to take it to that man at Mustapha, and sell it to him to make what use he liked of it?’

‘I don’t see how on earth they could find him out,’ Eustace answered dubiously; ‘or, even if they did, how they could possibly know the locket had anything in the world to do with him?’

Meriem set her lips hard.

‘We must hunt it down,’ she said resolutely. ‘We must hunt it down, however long it takes us. I could never look Iris or Vernon in the face again unless I was quite sure I hadn’t broken my word to them. I said to Iris that day, on the hillside at Beni-Merzoug—I said it quite solemnly—“I don’t want the money, Iris,” I said; “it’s yours. You may keep it.” And I wouldn’t for the world Iris should ever think I tried to rob her either of that or of Vernon. Not that I grudge her Vernon now, of course, Eustace. My eyes are opened, and I know better than that. But I want not to rob her of the money, either, for I love her dearly. She’s the only woman I ever met in my life who could treat me as she treated me. I love her for it, and it would

break my heart if she were ever to think I wanted to rob her.'

'I don't believe she could possibly think so,' Eustace answered, with quiet confidence. 'Nobody could ever look upon your face, Meriem, and not see that you were truth and honesty incarnate.'

Meriem's face flushed rosy red.

'Yusuf was like that,' she said, in her simple way. 'I shall always be proud to be like Yusuf's daughter.'

CHAPTER XLV.

ON THE TRACK.

THE two broken links he had found on the railway line irresistibly suggested to Eustace's mind the probability that the chain as a whole, and the locket with it, must have been caught by the engine as it passed lightly over Meriem's body, torn from her at a wrench, and carried along for an indefinite distance in the direction of Bouira. It was quite possible, indeed, that the entire ornament might still be clinging to some projecting screw of the engine or buffers; and the first question for Eustace to decide was, therefore, what particular locomotive had been attached that day to the early morning train from Setif. If he could find out that point, he might intercept the engine at the station, and examine its bottom and sides carefully.

Next morning, accordingly, as soon as he was able to find his way on his own legs out into the village, he made inquiries of the officials as to the locomotive in question. The *chef de gare* was all French politeness; it was the *Avenir de l'Algérie* that drew the train on the day of monsieur's most deplorable accident; and if monsieur, who had rendered such signal service to the colony at the risk of his life (for a telegram from the Governor-General had already conveyed to Eustace the public thanks for saving the beleaguered garrison of St. Cloud), would have the goodness to call at the station to-morrow evening at 4.20, the *Avenir de l'Algérie* would be delayed for five or ten minutes as it passed, so that monsieur might make a thorough search for the missing jewellery.

‘Mademoiselle wore diamonds, no doubt,’ the *chef de gare* suggested politely.

Eustace smiled. The notion of Meriem possessing such gewgaws was too supremely ridiculous. Yet he could hardly say he was making all this fuss about a mere Kabyle box in rough white metal, studded loosely on the lid with coral and lapis lazuli. It was not so much the locket itself, he replied evasively, that mademoiselle so highly valued, as the nature of the contents, which he believed to be of singular and unique value.

The *chef de gare* nodded. The train should be delayed, then. The colony was proud to manifest its gratitude to monsieur, who had shown so much devotion in saving the lives of our fellow-citizens.

But Meriem was little consoled to learn that she must wait another thirty hours or more before even a search could be made for her missing trinket—Yusuf’s last gift, and all that depended upon it.

At 4.20 next day, Eustace presented himself duly at the station, and with the help of the porters overhauled the locomotive and tender thoroughly. They found but one trace there to reward their pains—three or four more links of the broken chain, wedged in between the gearing that supports the buffers.

That discovery impressed more than ever upon Eustace’s mind the hopelessness and vagueness of this wild-geese chase. Evidently the locket had been carried away by the locomotive, and then dropped. They might have to look for it, bit by bit, along the whole line from Algiers to Constantine, a distance which it took thirteen hours for the fastest train in the day to traverse.

He went back to Meriem very ill-satisfied with the result of his search. But Meriem, when she heard his report, clasped her hands fervently, and answered with all the energy of her simple nature :

‘We must search the whole line as soon as I’m well enough, if we have to tramp from here to Constantine to do it. Not for worlds would I let that locket get into the hands of anybody who might try to use it against Vernon and Iris.

It was a dismal look-out, but Eustace tried to face it.

His strength returned much faster than Meriem's. In a day or two, indeed, he was able to venture out for a longer walk along the line, which he followed for a mile or so in the direction the locomotive had taken on the morning of the accident. He thought it probable that the locket would have been dropped before the train had gone many minutes on; and in effect, about the third kilomètre from Beni-Mansour, he came to his delight upon the broken lid, with its well-known decoration of rough blue stones and red bosses of jewellery. Where the lid was found, the box itself and its contents could not be very far distant. Following up the line a few hundred yards further, he soon perceived the remainder of Meriem's much-prized necklet, with the locket attached, lying between the ties in the middle of the rails. He caught it up, and examined the contents eagerly. They were all safe—and the secret was out. He found four or five small squares of thin foreign notepaper, folded and refolded with scrupulous care just to fit the box, and apparently covered on both sides with a close manuscript in European letters.

He could guess now why Meriem wished to read English handwriting.

Curiosity would naturally have led him to examine the manuscript, but without Meriem's consent he could not dream of doing so. He only saw vaguely against his own will, as he replaced the little squares carefully in their receptacle, that the outside roll bore on its face the distinct words, 'I, Clarence Knyvett, formerly cornet'—and there the visible part of the paper broke off, with the line unfinished.

Happily, in that dry climate, the papers had lain out in the open air so many days and nights unhurt, with the box covering them. In England they would have been reduced long before then to a spontaneous amateur form of *papier mâché*.

It was with great joy that he returned to the Rest House with his spoils to Meriem. She took them anxiously, and, turning them over, looked at each paper separately, with an eager eye, lest any should be missing. Then she glanced up at Le Marchant, and said, with a sigh:

'So now you know my secret, Eustace.'

'I do not,' Eustace answered; 'or only a little of it. I saw the papers were safe; but, without your leave, I would never have dreamt of looking at one of them, Meriem.'

Meriem gazed back at him with her large soft eyes.

'I knew you wouldn't, Eustace,' she said confidently.

'Then why do you say I know your secret?'

'Because, seeing these, you must surely guess it.'

'Not altogether,' Eustace answered, with truth. 'I've an idea, of course, but nothing further.'

Meriem turned to him, and opened them at full length before his eyes.

'We are one now, Eustace,' she said simply. 'I can trust you with anything. You may read them if you will. But you took me penniless, and penniless you must keep me.'

Eustace accepted the papers without any false show of reluctance from her hands, and read them through. His eyes were full of tears once or twice as he read. When he had finished, he turned to Meriem, and said quietly:

'You meant never to show them to anyone, Meriem?'

'I will never show them,' Meriem answered firmly. 'But because I love you, and because I can trust you, I show them to you, and to you only. You will never betray my secret, Eustace.'

Eustace rose, and kissed her tenderly on the forehead.

'Never,' he answered, with solemn emphasis. 'You're a brave girl, Meriem, and I honour you for it. I can work for you and keep you, in what to you and me will be sufficient comfort, or even luxury. Let Miss Knyvett hold to her money, if she will. I, for one, will never enlighten her.'

There was a short pause. Then Eustace spoke again:

'It's better as it is,' he said. 'I've always felt that. I never wished to marry a rich wife. I prefer to work, so that the woman I love may owe me everything. It's manlier so. Yet it will be something for us both to know through life, Meriem, that money was as water to us, when we had it to take, compared with our love for one another.'

Meriem, nestling close to him with her grand proud head, answered in a very low voice.

'One thing alone,' she said, 'in these last few days, has made me falter. Do you remember, Eustace, one morning

in the tent Mr. Whitmarsh was looking at that lovely collection of yours—the butterflies and beetles—and he said—that man who could never understand you—“If you chose to sell these things in London, Mr. Le Marchant, I expect you could make a great deal of money out of them.” And you looked up from the bird you were stuffing and answered quietly: “I’ve no time to waste on making money.” Though I wasn’t in love with you then, I thought that was grand. I’m only a woman—a poor, ignorant Kabyle woman—and I couldn’t quite understand your work, of course, or why it was so important for you to learn all about the beasts and birds, and the plants and flowers, though I fancy I can dimly guess just a little how it is; but I thought what you answered was grand, for all that. I said to myself: “If it were not for Vernon, how a woman might love and admire Eustace!” And now that it’s come home to me, all in a flash, how much greater and better a man you are than Vernon, I’ve said to myself again, more than once or twice: “Eustace has no time to waste on making money! I love him for that; I admire him for that; it’s so great and noble. But still, if he had money all ready made, if I had money of my own to give him, how much better work he might do for the world in that high way I can hardly understand, in finding out how everything came to be so! And sometimes, these last few days, I’ve almost regretted. I might have taken it, for your sake, Eustace, if I hadn’t said that day on the hillside to Iris: “The money’s yours. You must always keep it.”’

Eustace looked down at her with pride and joy.

‘Meriem,’ he said, pushing back the hair from her high white forehead, ‘if only you knew how much pleasure it gives me to hear you speak like that, you’d never want me to be rich in anything else but in your own dear love, my treasure, my darling! That you, who have lived this simple village life, without schools or books, should so enter into one’s thoughts and comprehend one’s aims as few educated Englishwomen could ever do, is to me wonderful—a triumph of nature. It makes me feel, more than ever, what a jewel I have found, and how unworthy I am of you. With you to help me and to spur me on, I shall need no wealth, I shall need no money. We two will do great work together

yet, penniless as we are. Keep your word to Iris, my child, whatever happens. Let Iris have her fortune still, as you promised. My Meriem, you're worth a thousand Irises.'

CHAPTER XLVI.

'ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH.'

Iris and her mother, meanwhile, with Uncle Tom, Vernon Blake, and the St. Cloud fugitives, were slowly recovering from their fatigue and their hurts at Tizi-Ouzou—which is, being interpreted, the gorge of the broom-plant—a picturesque little Frenchified village, perched on the summit of a conical hill, and separated from the base of the Kabylie Mountains by a broad but shallow and brawling river. St. Cloud itself having practically, for the moment, ceased to exist—a mere shell and a single shattered keep now alone represented the *ci-devant* Fort, while nothing more than blackened ruins remained of what was once the flourishing village—the rescued survivors had perforce retired at once upon the nearest secure European station, where it was necessary for them to rest for a few days *en route*, before proceeding to Algiers, to regain their wonted strength and composure.

Vernon Blake's wound, too, neglected by dire necessity on the night of the outbreak, had now to be more carefully dressed and bandaged; and the task of nursing him in the little inn at Tizi-Ouzou, which proclaimed itself aloud as Hôtel de l'Univers, naturally devolved, in the fitness of things, upon Mrs. Knyvett, and more especially upon Iris. They were the only two women in the place with whom the English painter had any language in common; and it must be admitted parenthetically that Iris, for her part, in spite of her profound ethical studies, was by no means unwilling to accept this very good excuse for continuing to see somewhat more than was right of the man whom she still persisted in regarding as *de jure* her cousin Meriem's lover. The female conscience, even though it belong to the aggravated Knyvett variety, is readily salved in such cases. It hoodwinks itself, on easy terms, with the 'tyrant's plea' of

necessity. For how could Iris let a brave defender (and handsome, too, at that) lack fit attendance from his own fellow-countrywoman in his hour of need on no better ground than merely because Meriem happened to have a vested interest in him?

Nay, it must even be admitted, with a blush, by the candid chronicler, that both Iris and Vernon intensely enjoyed these necessary interviews thus thrust upon them, against the will of one party at least, by the inevitable decrees of manifest destiny. It's wrong to flirt, of course, as we all know, with somebody else's affianced lover; but if somebody else's affianced lover is seriously wounded in the left shoulder, in somebody else's unavoidable absence, and with nobody else to tend and care for him—why, common charity compels a girl of feeling to undertake, in somebody else's own interest, the vicarious task of nursing him; and even if that task should happen to prove in itself agreeable, can there be anything wrong in thus giving way (on compulsion, observe!) to your natural instincts as a ministering angel? Uncertain, coy, and hard to please as Vernon Blake had found Iris Knyvett in her hours of ease at St. Cloud in the mountains, he was forced to acknowledge that when pain and anguish (neither of them, it must be admitted, very profound in character) wrung his brow at Tizi-Ouzou, she was the nearest and deftest and most thoughtful of nurses. The stern moralist himself could hardly object, indeed, to one's putting fresh roses and violets every morning with tender care by an invalid's bedside; and all the rules of propriety are silent in the lump as to the wrongfulness of bringing good beef-tea to a wounded man (engaged or otherwise) on a pretty Moorish tray rendered sweet with stephanotis, plumbago, and lilac-blossom. To such double-dyed crimes Iris pleaded guilty each evening with shame to her own conscience in the privacy of her bedchamber—and absolved herself forthwith on further examination upon the varied pleas of gratitude, friendship, and medical direction.

Communications with their absent friends had already been restored. A telegram from Eustace had announced, shortly after their arrival at Tizi-Ouzou, his own safety and Meriem's, while gliding with a light hand over the thrilling

story of their respective accidents. Iris knew, therefore, it was to Meriem's devotion in part that they owed their safety—the papers, indeed, had told her so much—and she was pursued day and night by an uncomfortable feeling that this new claim on Meriem's part put her all the more upon her honour in all her difficult and very uncertain relations with her cousin's lover. Yet in spite of everything—for the human heart will have its say within itself, repress it as we may in all external manifestations—the Third Classic couldn't deny to her own soul that she was supremely happy with a momentary happiness in taking care of her wounded painter. It was a happiness, alas! that must soon cease; the horrid shoulder would get all right in time; but while it lasted, at any rate, it was well worth enjoying. *Monochronos hêdonê*, her Greek epicurean guide had told her; the one fleeting moment of pure delight in a transient world is all we can count upon. Might she not fairly drink it in while it still endured? for Meriem would have him soon, too soon, for ever.

On that fixed point she had made her mind up fairly and squarely once for all. Whether he would or whether he would not, Vernon Blake must marry Meriem.

Yet when once or twice, discreetly smiling, she returned to the charge at her invalid in this direction, with a dexterous side-thrust, Vernon Blake had only answered her with malicious audacity, 'Without descending into quite such minute particulars as that, you know, I propose at any rate, with your kind permission, to marry somewhere into the Knyvett family.' And thereat Iris, discomfited, could only laugh and blush—feeling all the time that both blush and laugh were distinct betrayals of her trust to Meriem.

'If you go on talking so,' the Third Classic exclaimed to him once, continuing, nevertheless, to arrange the roses in the vase by his side with trembling fingers as she spoke, 'I shall go right away this very minute and not come back any more at all, but just leave my mother to do all the nursing. It's very unkind of you to take such an advantage of your helpless condition. I've told you once for all quite plainly what I think, that day at St. Cloud, and I can't reopen the subject again with you now.'

But none the less, her quivering lips belied her angry

words, and her downcast eyes had a strange mist gathering almost imperceptibly over their dimmed pupils.

'Yes, I know; I remember,' Vernon Blake replied, with that false boldness which love had taught his sensitive nature: 'you said that day at St. Cloud you *did* love me; and when the woman he loves once tells a man that, do you think he's likely, Miss Knyvett, ever to forget it?'

Iris winced.

'But I also said,' she murmured, in a very low voice, 'I could never marry you: I could never rest till you'd married Meriem.'

'And I said, for my part,' Vernon Blake retorted, pretending to move his wounded arm painfully to attract her sympathy, 'I said, "I'll marry you or nobody, Iris." And I don't see why what I said on that particular occasion shouldn't be stuck to just as much as what *you* said, Iris. Oh yes, I'll call you *Iris*, if I choose; I shall; and if you don't like it, you may go away as you threaten and send your mother.' But he clung for all that to her hand that he'd seized among the roses by his side, and pressed it tight. 'You told me you loved me, you know,' he murmured once more, 'and when a woman once tells a man such a thing as that, he has a right if he chooses to call her Iris.'

The blushing Gorton girl struggled hard to set herself free, but all in vain. Man remains the stronger animal of the two, in spite even of the higher education.

'Oh, how can I ever face Meriem again?' she cried at last, bursting into sudden tears. 'It's cruel of you, Mr. Blake, to bring up such a casual phrase against me. What I said that day, I slipped out by accident—by the purest accident; I said it out of the fulness of my heart at the moment, trusting to your chivalry not to use it against me; and now you're using it against me and against Meriem. Oh, how can I ever dare to face her again and tell her all this? She'll think I've betrayed her; she'll think I've been false to her. And I—who'd break my own heart to serve her!—I said to her that morning on the rocks at Beni-Merzoug: "He *must* marry you, Meriem! He *shall* marry you! I'll make him marry you!" And if I tell her this, she'll say I've betrayed her.'

Vernon Blake released her hand with a jerk, as if in anger.

'And did it never occur to you,' he asked, with mock sternness, 'that in making that private disposition of somebody else's heart and hand on your own account you were arranging a bargain without asking the consent of one of the most interested parties in the arrangement?'

'But you'd made her love you!' Iris cried, pleading faintly. It's hard to have to plead your rival's cause against your own inclination. 'You'd no right, you know, to break poor Meriem's heart. You, who were so much above her, and better than her in every way; you, who could paint such beautiful pictures, and say such lovely poetical things, and fill her poor head with thoughts that could never otherwise have got there, how could you fail to win her heart when you tried—or even if you did not try at all, for that matter?'

'That's just my excuse,' the painter answered contritely.

Iris blushed once more. She recognised too late that she had inadvertently played the enemy's best card, so she relapsed into the safe refuge of silence.

Vernon Blake let her muse on for a moment without following up his advantage. It was better so. He knew it by instinct. A woman can feel her own heart beat hard against her breast in these awkward pauses. Her emotion has time to force itself on her consciousness. Then he began again in a very low voice.

'At St. Cloud the other night,' he said softly, 'when you women were all huddled in a group on the roof, and the Kabyles were firing and stabbing and thrusting at us like wild beasts, and the gate was one living blaze of light, and all hope was over, and the men were giving up, I said to myself: "If it comes to the worst, I shall rush upstairs and take her in my arms, my wounded arms—that queen among women—and hold her tight there in one last embrace, and press her just once to my bosom like a lover, and wait for those brutes to kill us two together—and then . . . no Kabyle girl on earth shall ever divide us. She shall be mine, one moment, if we die for it together!" And just as I thought my dream was coming true—you may pity me, Iris, if you can't love me—the Zouaves came up, those horrid Zouaves, and spoilt it all—and here you are telling me to go and marry Meriem. . . . You may tell me till

you're hoarse, but, Iris, I swear to you, if I wait a hundred years, I shall make you marry me, now I know you love me. I shall never, never marry the Kabyle girl !'

Iris bent down her head in her hands and sobbed.

'You are cruel, Mr. Blake !' she cried. 'You are too, too cruel !'

How inartistic in its brusque transitions is real life ! Just at that moment, that critical moment, as luck would have it, when the painter would fain have bent over her and kissed her, who should appear most inopportunately at the door but François, the boots, who, thrusting in his head with the comic confidential nod of the French manservant, observed laconically, like one that takes in the situation at a glance, '*Ne vous dérangez pas, messieurs et dames—voilà le facteur qui vient d'arriver—une lettre pour mademoiselle,*' and vanished with a discreet smile instantaneously. Iris took the envelope from his hands and mechanically opened it. It was a note in a large round childish hand, the very first letter, in fact, Meriem had ever tried to write to anybody in English manuscript.

'MY DEAR IRIS,' it said, in its big straggling characters, 'I have something very important to tell you when we meet—something that I think will make you ever so happy. Please don't say anything to Vernon that will hurt him till you see me. I will go to Algiers with Eustace whenever you're ready to go yourself. Eustace will arrange with Vernon to meet us at the place the train stops at, when he knows what day you mean to start. It's all so strange to me, I can't arrange about it. Now I must leave off. This is all. Excuse the blots, as this is the first English letter I've ever written. I know you'll be glad when you hear what I have to tell you.

'Ever your very loving cousin,
'MERIEM KNYVETT.'

The signature alone was full of novelty. Iris folded the letter up, and slipped it into her bosom with a throbbing heart. What thing it might forbode she hardly as yet even dared to conjecture ; but she somehow vaguely realized to herself the fact that it was a way out for herself and Vernon.

She looked at the painter, as he lay pale upon his bed, with one wistful look ; and then, mindful of Meriem's charge, slipped from the room without one other word to him. Her heart was far too full, indeed, for words ; they might mislead her. And suppose she were mistaken, what going back would then be possible ?

Till she saw Meriem now, she could never dare to face Vernon again. It was with no little relief, therefore, that she learned to her joy that evening from the Tizi-Ouzou doctor that her patient might venture upon leaving to-morrow.

CHAPTER XLVII.

TO ALGIERS.

It was with a distinct shrinking that Meriem Knyvett (as she had for the first time signed her name in her letter to Iris) allowed herself to be hurried into a first-class compartment on the East Algerian Railway at Beni-Mansour station. Her only previous acquaintance with the locomotive, indeed, had been far from a reassuring one ; and it required no small exercise of courage on the part of an untutored mountain girl to trust herself now to be whirled along through the country at the tail of that snorting, roaring, careering fire-breather, whose fierce assault she had so lately experienced *in propria persona* as it swooped down the slope towards the bridge in the gully. Eustace, however, assured her there was no danger in the railway ; and if Eustace said so, so it must be ; for to Eustace she now trusted herself wholly, with that sweet self-surrender which a true woman can always display towards her chosen counterpart. In fact, the timid Kabyle-bred girl seated herself in the train with as much outer composure as if she had been accustomed all her life to travelling on the line ; for Meriem shared with all other women of free democratic mountain communities that perfect natural breeding which prevents a person from ever feeling *gauche* or restrained or awkward, in whatever society, or under whatever circumstances. Habituated only to free intercourse with equals, it never even struck her that the greatest lady could look down

upon her, wherever she might be, or that she had need for any but her own natural manner to put her at her ease, in what company she might come across.

Eustace had before this recovered his European clothes by special messenger from the tent at Beni-Merzoug, and sat by her side, an Englishman once more, in his wonted garb, smiling and contented. The train moved off at last from the platform, to Meriem's inward discomfiture, with a loud shriek of the discordant whistle, and soon the inexperienced mountain maiden found herself rushing at what seemed to her a wildly impossible pace (though Eustace declared it was but the usual slow Algerian travelling) down the long inclines that lead from the Djurjura to the plains on whose edge stands the town of Algiers, in gleaming glory. Meriem was very, very happy. It never occurred to her to think, in her perfect innocence, how odd a sight it seemed to her fellow-travellers to see an English gentleman thus familiarly conversing with a simple Kabyle girl in haik and bernouse. To her, it was merely herself and Eustace. The conventionalities had not yet begun to exist for her. So she rolled along the smooth line in strange content, glad in her heart to think she was going away with Eustace, and leaving those terrible scenes of war for ever behind her.

On the platform at Ménerville, the party from Tizi-Ouzou was waiting to go on with them. As they steamed into the station, Meriem rushed to the window to catch a first glimpse of her recovered Iris. She knew not why—perhaps it was because blood is thicker than water, perhaps because Iris was the only girl she had ever met who at all approached her own natural and vigorous mental stature, the only one who could sympathize with the profounder European half of her strong nature—but at any rate, for whatever reason, she loved Iris already as she had never before loved any other woman. On the platform she caught sight of Iris's pretty face, still a trifle pale from the terrors of the night attack, but beaming with wreathed smiles at Meriem's evident childish anxiety to greet her. Meriem leapt out, in spite of her fears, almost before the train had quite come to a standstill (regardless of the regulations to the contrary in the company's by-laws), and flung her arms wildly, in an access of fervour, round her cousin's neck. Then she turned with

a smile to Vernon Blake, and holding out her white hand with perfect frankness, leant over in her innocent simplicity to kiss him.

As their faces met, Iris's heart beat hard in suspense. But Meriem, drawing her English kinswoman aside, while Uncle Tom was hurrying Mrs. Knyvett into her place in the train, half whispered in her ear with a smile of delight, 'We shall soon be cousins, you know, Vernon and I; for as soon as you hear what I have to tell you, I'm sure, Iris, you won't any longer refuse to marry him.'

Iris pressed her hand hard, in mute reply, and kissed the beautiful Kabyle girl on each cheek once more. There was no time just then to ask anything further. The inexorable train that waits for no man was whistling in its eager anxiety to be off.

'*En voiture, mesdames !*' sang out the shrill-voiced *chef de gare*; and, with a hurried return, they were soon on their road again for Algiers—and Harold.

How they chatted and laughed, in spite of all their past terrors, on that merry journey: Meriem full of the double delight of her own new-found love and of making Iris happy; Iris, notwithstanding her wonderment and surprise, yet vaguely conscious in her silent joy that for some mysterious reason Meriem was cheerfully and willingly yielding Vernon Blake up to her! How they exchanged the terrible stories of their respective perils in the minutest detail! How Iris described the horrors of the night attack till Meriem was heartily ashamed to herself of those creatures who had once been her fellow-countrymen! How Meriem, in turn, dwelt upon the wild terrors of that appalling machine which civilization had sent, with its fiery steed, to startle and alarm her native mountains! They tingled and thrilled with their mutual confessions. But at last, when Iris had finished her narrative of that ghastly assault, and retailed with picturesque horror the savage onslaught of those fanatic insurgents, Meriem looked up at her and asked, with a sigh:

'Are there ever Jehads in your religion, Iris?'

'No,' Iris answered fervently; 'thank Heaven, no, Meriem! Our religion's spread by persuasion alone. It horrifies us to see such deeds as those done.'

'And it horrifies me, too, to hear of them,' Meriem replied simply. 'But our people think it right. They *must* be mistaken.' Then with a sudden burst: 'Oh, Iris, Iris, I'm ashamed to think I ever belonged to them! I almost wish it may be very wrong but I somehow almost wish I was like you—a Christian!'

Iris could hardly forbear a smile at the perfect *naïveté* of this quaint confession; but Mrs. Knyvett, sitting bolt upright in the corner, started back in her seat in the utmost alarm, and gazed at Meriem with the sort of horror and surprise with which one regards a scorpion or other venomous reptile.

'Gracious heavens, Iris!' she cried, astonished; 'you don't mean to say this poor misguided girl—your uncle Clarence's daughter—has really and truly been brought up a Mussulwoman—or whatever else one ought to call it?'

'Why, what else on earth could she possibly be brought up, mother dear?' Iris answered, with a gentle warning look. This was surely not the best way conceivable to lull poor Meriem's still surviving prejudices.

'I never met any infidels at all before I met Eustace and Vernon, you see, Iris,' Meriem went on reflectively. 'Till then, of course, I'd only heard harm and evil-speaking about infidels. Some people said Yusuf was an infidel at heart himself till the day of his death, and that that was why he went down sometimes to St. Cloud to see the Père Baba; but I used to be very angry with them when they told me that, naturally, because I thought in those days that all Christians must be very, very, very wicked. And now, since I've seen how Christians behave and how our people behave, I'm beginning to think—I'm not quite sure whether it's sinful or not—but I'm beginning to think I wish I was a Christian like you, Iris.'

Iris's eyes dropped timidly to the ground. 'I'm afraid it's not often,' she answered humbly, 'we Christians commend ourselves among people who do not belong to our religion in that way, Meriem. I wish we did so a great deal better. But I suppose you won't live among Kabyles any more, now your uncle's gone. You'll come and live with us over in England, of course; and then you'll soon learn to think and feel as we do.'

‘I’d never live among people like those again,’ Meriem cried energetically—‘no, not if I was to be killed for it. I’d never live among people who believe in Jehads, and try to shoot others—men, women, and children—for no excuse or cause. Why, it’s horrible to think of! It’s worse than the French who fought against our people, though Yusuf always said they were wickeder than anybody. I’m glad you’re all English, and not French. I suppose that’s because I’m Yusuf’s daughter. And as to the infidels, why, I suppose, of course, I shall be a Christian myself, too, when——’ She checked herself suddenly, with a rich red blush. She had nearly blurted out in her haste and vehemence, ‘when I’m married to Eustace.’ But, frank as she was, she couldn’t quite tell her whole heart’s secret so openly as that before the face of Vernon and Uncle Tom and Mrs. Knyvett.

‘When you get to England,’ Iris suggested, quietly finishing off the broken sentence for her in a non-committing fashion. For Iris, too, had observed how her eyes fell upon Eustace, half unconsciously, as she spoke, and began now to spell out for herself the solution of this singular mystery.

‘When I get to England,’ Meriem answered, catching gladly at the proffered means of escape. ‘I don’t know how it is, Iris, but I somehow feel sure I shall like England. I’ve felt more at home, more sympathetic, I think you call it, with all you English than I ever felt with anybody at all at Beni-Merzoug. I used to think at first, when Vernon and Eustace were newly come, it was only because you were Yusuf’s people, and I was prepared to like you for Yusuf’s sake, as Yusuf’s fellow-countrymen. But the more I’ve seen and known of you all, the more I’ve found out that that was a mistake. I’m nearer to all of you than I ever could be to anybody else; I like you and sympathize with you, not only because you’re Yusuf’s people, but because you’re my people—my own people—as well—my neighbours, my kinsmen, my like in nature. One day Vernon repeated me a bit of an English song—about a bird, a skylark, you know—and that day I remember it came home to me suddenly that I felt all that quite differently from the way I could ever feel anything in the Kabyle verses. Ours are all verses about such common things—the olive-harvest, and

the corn, and fighting, and wife-buying. But this was a song about how a bird went up singing and rejoicing in the air—such a beautiful song—and I remember a bit of it, a bit that said—

“ We look before and after,
And pine for what is not ;
Our sincerest laughter
With some pain is fraught,
Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.”

I thought that was lovely—as much as I understood of it—and I thought, too, no Kabyle that ever lived could possibly have made a song like that ; so I thought at the same time I must be a good deal English, after all, myself, or it wouldn't seem so much more beautiful than any of our silly little Kabyle verses.'

Not even Uncle Tom could refrain from joining in the hearty laugh that greeted this candid outburst of native simplicity. The idea that any Kabyle poetry could possibly come into competition with Shelley's 'Skylark' was too utterly grotesque for the most prosaic intelligence, the Probate and Divorce Division itself included. They all laughed, but they all laughed with very different undercurrents of inner emotion.

Iris, half piqued at the idea that her painter should have repeated those exquisite lines to any other woman, yet couldn't help feeling at the same time how infinitely Vernon must realize her own superiority to poor barefooted Meriem. She, with her cultivated European mind, to be jealous of that ignorant, uncultured Kabyle girl ! It would be really and truly quite too ridiculous.

Vernon, half ashamed Meriem should thus innocently rake up his past evil deeds against him, yet couldn't help feeling that Iris must see how utterly he would be thrown away upon such a girl as Meriem. To waste himself on her, with his poetical nature, when a Third Classic had confessed her love for him, would, indeed, be little short of simple wickedness.

And Eustace, delighted with Meriem's perfect candour, thought to himself with admiration how profound was the nature of that wild mountain girl, who could see for herself

On a first glance the wide gulf that separated such a poet as Shelley from her own fellow-countrymen, and could pick out instinctively from his most exquisite poem the deepest and most essentially central stanza. Whither might not such a soul as that attain, in fitting surroundings for its free development, and with congenial companionship to guide and direct it!

What a wonderful passion is love to warp and bias our calmer judgment! How clearly it lets us see one side of a question, and how perfectly contented it makes us, not only with the person on whom it fixes its oblique glance, but with ourselves into the bargain, seen by the reflected light of that other person's profound admiration!

So they journeyed on merrily together to Algiers, each in a very good humour with himself, and unheeding of the thunderbolt that Harold Knyvett held in readiness to let loose upon them as soon as they got there.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

CHECK!

AT Algiers station Uncle Tom recovered such fragments of luggage as still remained to them (for most of their wardrobe had been destroyed at St. Cloud, so that they were sorely in need of a rapid return to their base of supplies at Sidi Aia), while Iris seized the opportunity to charter a special fiacre of her own (with a picturesque turbaned Arab driver) to mount the Mustapha Hill in quiet conference alone with Meriem. The others could all go in the big carriage, she said—her own carriage: Uncle Tom, and mother, and Mr. Blake, and Mr. Le Marchant; but they two girls would drive up in solitary grandeur in a hired cab; for to say the truth, the Third Classic, for all the world like any common boarding-school miss, was burning with the desire to have a good *tête-à-tête* for half an hour with her Kabyle cousin. Uncle Tom objected that this course of action would look very odd; the young woman hadn't even got stockings to her feet! but Iris, of course, promptly overruled his futile objection; and as Eustace Le Marchant put in a word, too, on the same

side, Uncle Tom, overjoyed, at least, at the chance of separating the heiress from that dangerous fortune-hunter for half an hour, consented to connive at the improper arrangement.

‘We must keep her well away from that sneaking naturalist fellow, Amelia,’ he whispered in his sister’s ear in strict confidence. ‘It’s a jolly lucky thing it was the painter, poor creature! who was up with us at St. Cloud the night of the fight—he’s an innocent boy, that, and as shy as girls used to be when you and I were young; but if it had been the other one, why, I’ll bet you a sovereign he’d have proposed to her outright on the strength of having got a slight graze on his shoulder in the little brush with those brutes of Kabyles.’

Uncle Tom was inordinately proud of his own part in that little brush, and therefore, of course, always gracefully spoke of it, after the fashion of our kind, with becoming disparagement.

‘Now, you must tell me all about it, Meriem,’ Iris said at once, as soon as they were seated side by side incongruously in that convenient *fiacre*, and out of earshot, on their way up to Mustapha. ‘You know you’re to be my guest at Sidi Aia, of course; and before I get there I’ve a particular reason for wanting to know exactly how you stand with—
with Mr. Blake and Mr. Le Marchant.’

Meriem smiled a curiously contented and suppressed smile at the patronizing way in which Iris comported herself as the mistress of Sidi Aia; but she went on, nevertheless, with all young love’s first gushing readiness, to pour out her story—her strange, strange story—into the sympathetic ears of a female confidante. She told the whole tale with that unvarnished frankness which in Meriem resulted as a joint product of Kabyle simplicity and the straightforward inherited Knyvett nature. She suppressed nothing; she apologized for nothing; she softened down nothing; not even how she said, ‘Whatever made me think so much of Vernon?’ Iris smiled a little satisfied smile of conscious superiority when Meriem said in her simple way: ‘It burst upon me all like a flash of lightning, you know, Iris; I thought to myself, with a sudden revulsion: “Great heazens! what have I done? Have I risked his life—

Eustace's life—for such a man as Vernon? He's worth a thousand times as much as Vernon Blake! And he loves me as Vernon could never love anyone.”

At that Iris's brow clouded over a little for half a second. She hardly knew if she ought to sit still and listen to such sacrilege as those words of Meriem's. Her Vernon! her painter! her poet! her king of men! This Kabyle girl dare so lightly to reckon him up with her own small reckoning! What presumption! what audacity! what foolhardy self-confidence! But at any rate she was free to marry Vernon now! Free to marry the man she so loved! For that, she could forgive a great deal to Meriem!

And when Meriem ended at last, with her transparent guilelessness: ‘So then, Iris, he just drew me down to his sofa and kissed me, and I laid my head, so, on his shoulder and cried, and was, oh! so happy, so unspeakably happy!’—the mollified Girton girl felt half inclined, there in the open road, on the Mustapha Hill, to fling her arms around her newly-found cousin's neck, and kiss the barefooted Kabyle maiden then and there before the eyes of wondering passers-by, Arab or European. Love is so very much alike at bottom, after all, in all of us!

‘And now, Iris,’ Meriem cried, in conclusion, holding her cousin's gloved hand tight in her own bare gloveless fingers, ‘I want you and Vernon to be married to one another, and to be rich and happy, and to live as you like at Sidi Aia.’

‘But you must have some of my money, too!’ Iris exclaimed with effusion, regardless of Uncle Tom's oft-iterated advice. ‘You must let me share it with you—not half, perhaps, but as much as Uncle Tom thinks right and proper.’

Meriem smiled a reticent smile—that curious smile that Iris had noticed so often this morning.

‘I'll take some of Sir Arthur's money, if you wish it,’ she answered sedately, not like one who accepts a favour, but with a certain grand reserve which struck Iris at once, as did also the altered phrase, ‘Sir Arthur's money.’ ‘But Eustace and your uncle will settle all that between them, I dare say. Of course, I don't understand such things as these. Whatever you arrange, Eustace and I will be well satisfied.’

They turned round the corner at the Colonne Voirol—Meriem all aghast, internally, as she went along the road at the grandeur and magnificence of the great white Moorish villas that studded the hillside after the narrow streets and rough stone huts of her native mountains—and swept at last into the broad drive of a final white villa, more stately and magnificent and imposing than any of them. Meriem's heart rose up in her mouth at once at the sight. So this was Sidi Aia! This was Yusuf's inheritance! This was the palace that might once have been hers! But, like Caractacus at Rome, she envied it not. She was glad it had gone to Vernon and Iris.

What had she to do with grand villas like these? With Eustace by her side, she could be happy anywhere.

The carriage had passed them on the slope of the hill, and arrived at the door half a moment earlier. Vernon Blake was there already, waiting to give the heiress his hand as she alighted from the fiacre at her own proud porch. She took it tenderly, with a faint pressure. He half guessed what that meant as he mounted the steps gaily by her side into the first outer court, with its marble fountain, its floor of painted tiles, its palms and orange-trees, its luxuriant basin of waving water-weeds. His painter's eye looked round with delight on that perfect specimen of old Moorish architecture. Nothing more beautiful had he seen in Africa. The exquisite arcade, the long line of pillars, the glorious display of antique tiles, the depth of shadow in the recess of the doorway, all charmed and intoxicated his artistic instinct. It was a pure delight to Iris thus to show off her own domain in all its beauty to the man whom she now looked upon as its unconscious but pre-destined future possessor. 'It's lovely, Mr. Blake,' she said, turning round to him with a smile of quiet pride; 'very lovely, isn't it?'

And Vernon Blake, gazing about with a sigh, ejaculated fervidly: 'It's more than lovely. It's a painter's dream. Anything so exquisite I hardly thought existed in solid stone on this poor little planet of ours. How proud you must be . . . Miss Knyvett . . . to be its possessor!'

Iris's eye had an unwonted twinkle in it.

'Do you remember the Lord of Burleigh?' she said,

looking up at him with an audacious smile. The Girtton boldness was surely breaking out at last in the girl. 'Well, what Meriem has told me on the way up this morning has made me myself into a sort of inverted topsy-turvy Lady of Burleigh.' She took his hand once more, before Uncle Tom's very eyes, and led him with wondering feet into the broad white court. "'Proudly turned she round and kindly,'" she quoted low, with a change in the gender alone: "'All of this is thine and mine!'"

'You mean it, Iris?' he cried, with blinded eyes.

'I mean it,' she answered simply, in a whispered voice. 'And I am yours, too; I, too, am yours, for ever, Vernon.'

As she spoke, Uncle Tom, who was following them close, drew back suddenly with a startled cry of surprise and indignation. 'God bless my soul!' he exclaimed eagerly. 'What the devil is that fellow doing here, I wonder?'

Iris lifted up her eyes at these unexpected words, and looked in the direction where Uncle Tom was indignantly waving his heavy red hand. There, on the top step of the short flight of stairs that led from the outer to the inner court, stood Harold Knyvett, bowing and smiling, with arms outspread on either side of him, in an attitude of profuse and generous hospitality.

His fingers didn't tremble or his mouth twitch now. He had schooled himself by violent efforts for some days before to bear the shock of that supreme interview. Not a feature but was under complete control. His face was calm, with a sweet smile of conscious triumph. But he was bland and benignant too, with a rose in his button-hole; for he meant to win Iris as well as the property. He stood there waving them in like a great proprietor with a lordly sweep of his delicate white hand; come one, come all, they should taste his fare in his newly-acquired home with princely munificence.

'Why, goodness gracious, there's Harold!' Mrs. Knyvett exclaimed, with a benign nod of the condescending feature. 'How kind of him, really! But he's always so nice. He's run across to Algiers to bring me my bronchitis kettle!'

As for Iris, she looked up at that complacent figure in a vague dismay. Meriem, too absorbed in other affairs, had

forgotten to tell her of the bad man's presence at a villa at Mustapha. She hardly knew in her confusion what to make of the scene; when suddenly Harold enlightened her at a bound by coming down a step or two with a polite bow, and exclaiming point-blank at her, in his courtliest voice: 'Good-morning, Iris: how d'ye do, Aunt Amelia? I'm delighted, I'm sure, to welcome you both—and Mr. Whitmarsh too—as my guests in my home at Sidi Aia!'

Iris shrank back with a shudder of dismay. His home at Sidi Aia! Was the earth going to fail beneath her feet? What a bombshell! What a thunderbolt!

CHAPTER XLIX.

CONDITIONS OF PEACE.

'WELL, but what does he mean, dear?' Mrs. Knyvett was the first to ask, with a gasp, breaking the ominous silence that fell for a moment over the whole hushed little group at the sound of Harold's strangely significant words.

'I . . . I don't know, mamma,' Iris answered, undaunted still in heart, but taken aback somewhat by Harold's resolute attitude. 'I think he must mean that . . . that he has some claim or other we haven't yet heard about to Sidi Aia.'

'He means confounded impudence; that's just what he means,' Uncle Tom burst out with a burly bluster, walking up the step to confront his opponent angrily. 'The fellow's been juggling in your absence with Sir Arthur's letters and papers, I suppose, and thinks he's succeeded in mudding up a claim against you. But it won't do. I'm not the man to be put off with that sort of humbug. He's got the wrong person by the ear this time to deal with.'

'Oh, Miss Knyvett, Miss Knyvett!' old Sarah cried out in dismay, rushing down the steps and flinging her arms round Iris's neck passionately; 'it isn't my fault, my dear. I couldn't help it. Mr. Knyvett, he came over here three days ago, or there about, with a paper in his hand; and he said how he'd found a new will, and how the house and grounds was all his, and he was come to stay, and I must look upon him, henceforth, as a master, and that kind of

thing. And I said, had he any orders from you? And he said, no, he hadn't; he needed no orders; he came entirely on his own authority; and Sidi Aia was his own, not a bit of yours; but he'd be glad, when you returned, to welcome you back for a while, as his guest, to it. And what could I do, my dear, with him coming like that, and threatening to call in the gendarmes if I tried to resist him?'

As she spoke, Harold moved slowly down the steps towards Iris. He cast an angry glance at Uncle Tom as he passed—surely those Kabyle fellows, if they were anything of shots, might have managed to put a hole through that broad mark, his waistcoat, and rid him at once of a dangerous and experienced opponent! The least among the marksmen of Wimbledon could not have missed it. But no matter for that; the day was his, *quand même*. He had fairly conquered all along the line. He could afford now to be gentlemanly and generous. And to a man of taste, like Harold Knyvett, the expansive and liberal gentlemanly policy is always, in the end, the pleasantest and most congenial one.

'Iris,' he murmured, coming up to her close with a sickly smile, and holding out an obtrusively cordial hand, which Iris, in her righteous wrath, did not deign so much as to notice, 'there's no necessity for any scene just here. I desire this matter should at first be talked out in a friendly way, as between principals alone. An amicable arrangement on family grounds would, I'm sure, be easiest and most pleasing to all of us. Such an arrangement I can readily submit to you, if you'll allow me the pleasure of twenty minutes' conversation with you alone in my library. Perhaps you could spare me so much just now of your valuable time! So glad to see you looking so blooming, too, in spite of your shock. It's best we should understand one another distinctly, you know, from the very beginning.'

'I shall decidedly object to any proposal of the sort,' Uncle Tom burst out, with a very red face, blocking the staircase with his capacious frame. 'If Iris desires to hold any business communication of any sort with you, the regular thing will be for her to conduct her case——'

But Iris cut him short, before he could get any further, with an imperious nod of her self-willed little head. Though

her physical courage had failed her completely before the cut-throat bands of the insurgent Kabyles, she had moral courage enough left still to face a hundred interviews with her cousin Harold. She knew what the man wanted as well as if he had told her, and she preferred to say *No* to that degrading proposal before the eyes of no living witness. If Harold must again insult her by the hateful offer of his hand—that lying, scheming, mean wretch of a Harold—at least she would take care he did not insult her before the face even of her own nearest and dearest relations.

‘I’ll go with him, Uncle Tom dear,’ she put in boldly, soothing his arm with her tiny hand. ‘I’m not afraid to conduct my own case in person in such a matter, thank you. Harold has nothing to say to me, I know, that your presence could possibly in any way influence. I’ll settle this question with him alone. You and he can talk over business arrangements together afterwards.’

Harold accepted the last sentence at once as all but equivalent to a partial surrender, and smiled benignly with his prospective triumph. In the hour of success he would not be hard upon the fallen foe. ‘Perhaps,’ he remarked, with his blandest West-End politeness, ‘your mother and Mr. Whitmarsh will step into my drawing-room and take a chair while they wait for us for the present, Iris. And the lady in the bare feet, too—I haven’t the pleasure of her personal acquaintance, it’s true—but still, as she seems to be one of the party—I dare say, Sarah, you can make her comfortable in the kitchen somehow.’

He didn’t suspect, of course, that Meriem could understand him; but the fiery flush that mantled the Kabyle girl’s sunburnt face, from forehead to neck, was hardly so intense as that which overspread Iris’s sensitive cheek at this unintentional rudeness to her brave Algerian cousin. Even Uncle Tom, who had never been predisposed in favour of the Claimant, but whose personal dislike to that Paynim maiden had been naturally lessened by the story of her gallant attempt to cross the mountains for their safety’s sake, till it now sank all at once to zero, being metamorphosed into a feeling of positive friendliness by the sudden appearance on the scene of this new impostor—even Uncle Tom himself turned round to the blushing Kabyle girl

kindly, with a still deeper tint reddening his already red and indignant face, and laying his hand on her shoulder, said to her in his most gently paternal voice :

‘Come along, Meriem, my child ; you must be tired after your journey ; we’ll go and take a seat, till this business is finished, in Iris’s drawing-room.’

But Iris followed Harold blindly into the library, and there fell, rather than seated herself, in the big armchair, while the new proprietor of Sidi Aia took a place at some distance on the divan opposite.

‘Well?’ she said coldly, as he wriggled into his seat, looking up in his face with a defiant expression.

‘Well,’ Harold replied, keeping his eyes directly fixed on hers, lest she should have it to say that he didn’t dare to look her in the face ; ‘I suppose you can guess what this means, Iris? The story’s a short one. Briefly, I was suffering from nervous irritation at the office in London—over-work, I suppose, entailing loss of memory—so I consulted Yate-Westbury, the well-known specialist on such cases, who advised me to try a trip to Algiers. And *that*, you see, accounts for my coming here.’

‘I see,’ Iris answered, gazing back at him stonily.

He quavered before the steady stare of those beautiful blue eyes, but he kept on nevertheless upon his straight path with cynical fortitude.

‘Well, after I got here, stopping next door as I did with Yate-Westbury, I naturally took an early opportunity of calling round, and looking over Uncle Arthur’s place, by good old Sarah’s kind permission.’

‘I see,’ Iris replied once more, with rigid emphasis. ‘In short, you took an early opportunity, after your kind, of prowling about my house, while I was away, by deluding my servant with the practically untrue excuse of cousinhood.’

Harold winced.

‘Not *your* house, Iris,’ he answered abruptly, and with some asperity. ‘That’s exactly what I’m coming to. You anticipate too fast. But just at first, of course, I wasn’t aware of that myself. However, as it happens, I didn’t come uninvited. I called at Aunt Amelia’s special request to bring her bronchitis kettle, which I’d brought all the way

from London; and Sarah, learning I was Sir Arthur's nephew, naturally asked me in to view the villa—a piece of hospitality which you, apparently, would not have extended to your own relations.'

Iris bowed courteously.

'You interpret my sentiments with absolute correctness,' she replied, in the same cold and freezing tone as ever.

'We shall see about that soon,' Harold went on, with a faint attempt at something like gallantry. 'Iris, let's be reasonable; I don't want to be hard upon you. I don't want to quarrel. I want to be friends. We were children together, you know, and always friendly. Let's be friendly still; don't let a matter of money come between us like a shadow. I'm prepared to make a liberal arrangement, a most liberal arrangement, if you'll only listen to reason. But wait awhile for that; facts first; this is what happened. I brought Yate-Westbury to the house quite casually one afternoon, and as he was trying a lot of keys on a concealed drawer in Sir Arthur's davenport, suddenly, to his surprise, one of them fitted it. Well, he opened the drawer, of course, and turned over the papers; and among them, to my immense astonishment, as well as his own'—Iris bit her lip to stifle a sarcastic smile—'came across a will of Sir Arthur's, later in date than the one you found in London, leaving everything absolutely to me, and naming me also as sole executor. So that Sidi Aia and all the English property's really mine. And I grieve to say you're not benefited a single penny by the final disposition.'

'Is that all?' Iris asked, with an impatient movement, gazing at him frigidly.

'No, that's not all,' Harold answered, rising from the divan, and drawing a chair very tentatively a foot or two nearer to his pretty cousin. 'Iris,' and he leant across towards her with a persuasive air and a killing smile, 'I know you don't want to be friends—that's unfortunately obvious; but I can't bear to think this money should sever us—this wretched money—a mere matter of a few acres of land and a few pounds at the banker's—we who were always such good friends before—and I who have always loved you as a cousin, and have lately learned how much more profoundly and intimately I loved you as a friend and an admirer,

not to say as a lover. I couldn't bear, Iris, to deprive you of your wealth, or, rather, of the wealth you once erroneously supposed to be yours; and I'm longing to make a proposition to you now which will leave it yours just as fully as ever. I don't want you to give me an answer at once—in your present frame of mind, I'm afraid I know what that answer would be—I want delay, I want respite; I want you to turn the matter over and consider it. Iris, I asked you to marry me once. You were then, you thought, rich, and I was a beggar. To-day, you see, the tables are, unhappily, turned. It is I who am rich, and you who have practically next to nothing. I regret the change, but I won't let you lose by it. For your sake, for your dear sake, I'm willing that things should remain almost the same as ever. If, after due consideration, you can find it in your heart to change your mind, and consent to marry me, I'll make a settlement of half the property upon you, so that you will still be rich, and, as my wife, will practically possess it all absolutely. Now, don't answer at once, Iris; take time to think. Remember, I adore you, I worship you, I love you; and what I care about in this is not the money—the paltry, miserable, wretched money—I'd fling that in the sea if I could gain your approbation by so doing—but you, my beloved, my queen, my darling! I love you, Iris, and I *must*, I *will*, I *shall* make you marry me!'

His hands were trembling now, but with natural emotion, and he meant it as he spoke—he meant every word of it. The presence of that pure and beautiful girl had raised him for a moment, rogue and forger as he was, out of his own vile self; and he felt he could really fling the money into the Mediterranean—that stolen money—if only he could win Iris's love by so flinging it. Her sweet face kept down for awhile the mad impulse that struggled for mastery within him. He was quivering with excitement, but it was the honestest excitement he had known for months—the sanest, the purest, the least selfish and self-centred. He longed for Iris to enjoy his wealth; he longed to share his wealth with Iris. That idea for the second kept him tolerably sane. He was almost as rational and collected as ever.

But Iris rose as he finished his speech—that vile speech of his—the wretch, who judged her so much by his own base

standard that he thought he could buy Iris Knyvett for money—and standing before him sublime, in her full height (how imposing a good woman looks in her five feet six of righteous indignation!), she answered him passionately, with a wild outburst of speech:

‘Never! NEVER! NEVER! *NEVER!* . Harold, I need no time to consider. I don’t want to pollute myself by hearing what you say. I loathe and detest you for your horrid deception that day at Kensington. I loathe and detest you for your horrid attempt to buy me to-day. I don’t know whether you’ve forged this will or not; I don’t know whether Uncle Tom can fight you over it or not; I don’t know whether you can filch away my property or not; but, rich or poor, forger or liar, success or failure, I’ll never marry you—never, never, never, never! For money, I care a great deal less than nothing. You may do your worst, but you won’t alter me. And lest you should still continue to hope, and scheme, and plan, and annoy me with your horrible attentions and your base proposals, I’ll tell you the truth at one fell blow: I’ve already accepted a better man than you—ten thousand times better; and if we starve together, through your machinations, him I’ll marry and no other.’ And she moved towards the door with that resolute air which, as Harold Knyvett instinctively perceived, implied that the question between them was closed for ever.

Harold followed her through the stately Saracenic archway, twirling the reinstated button with a nervous twitching in his tremulous fingers.

‘Very good,’ he said coldly, the devil within him reasserting its hateful sway once more. ‘It’s open war, then, to the knife, Miss Knyvett. You leave yourself no door for escape or mercy. This will shall be proved—and you’ll be beggared—beggared!’

Iris didn’t see him as she swept from the room with her back turned to him. If she had, she would have observed that his face as he spoke, for all his calmness, was distorted with rage, and hideous to gaze upon. It looked like the face of a devil, or a maniac.

CHAPTER L.

OPEN WAR.

IN the drawing-room opposite, Uncle Tom was seated on an Oriental ottoman in the pretty arched recess between the two deep windows, while Meriem by his side, with eyes cast round in wonder upon that beautiful room, was conversing with the red-faced old gentleman eagerly and unreservedly as to what the bad man could possibly want with dear Iris. This *dénouement* was worse, indeed, than her worst anticipations. It was clear the bad man had asserted his claim to ruin Iris. In the centre of the room, Mrs. Knyvett occupied her active mind in turning over the ornaments on the occasional tables, unconscious of the crisis, to see if they'd been properly dusted in her daughter's absence ; while on one side Eustace and Vernon were conversing in an undertone, exchanging ideas on this sudden alteration in the aspect of their joint matrimonial prospects. To whom thus engaged, enter Iris with a sweep, her face showing all the air of a tragedy queen ; closely followed by Harold in the rear, composing his features with great difficulty into a sufficiently calm and quiet frame to suit his expected interview with that old fool Whitmarsh.

As they entered, Uncle Tom rose abruptly, and motioned Iris to a seat by the window with old-fashioned courtesy. The discomfited heiress sat down with emphasis by Meriem's side, holding her cousin's hand tight in her own. Meriem guessed from her hot, flushed face and her downcast eyes what the bad man had been saying to discompose her. But Harold drew up a chair as if nothing out of the usual had lately happened, and addressed his discourse at once with ostentatious frankness to the ruffled old barrister.

'Mr. Whitmarsh,' he said, fumbling with one hand in his breast-pocket for a well-known paper, 'a worldly-wise person, with the fear of litigation before his eyes, would not, perhaps, take the bold step I am about to take. He would leave you to find out at your leisure for your own side the line of action he proposed to adopt, and allow you to govern yourself as best you might accordingly. But this

present business lies, fortunately, all within the family. We're all relations, and all, I trust, friends.'

'No!' Uncle Tom thundered out sullenly, and then was silent.

'All relations or connections, at least,' Harold went on, less glibly, fumbling still with his right hand in a nervous way in that left breast-pocket; 'and you're all now staying as guests in my house, so that I'm naturally anxious, as a mere matter of hospitality, to do the straightforward and honourable thing by every one of you.'

'The determination does you the highest credit,' Uncle Tom interposed, eyeing him closely and long through his forensic eyeglass.

'And I think it right, therefore, to explain to you here at full length what I've just been explaining in hasty outline in the library to Iris.'

He drew the paper—that precious paper—with a flourish from his left breast-pocket, and deposited it, with much show of internal reluctance, on the little Moorish occasional table. Then, in slow and deliberate words, he repeated once more at greater length the official story, so to speak, of its accidental discovery by Dr. Yate-Westbury in the secret drawer of Sir Arthur's davenport. Uncle Tom listened with a settled expression of profound scepticism on his acute round face.

'Ah, well, my fine fellow,' he thought to himself, with an internal smile of malicious triumph at Harold's approaching discomfiture, 'you've done for yourself this time, anyhow, you may be certain. The thing's a forgery, as sure as a gun; and if it's a forgery, I'm cocksure to be able to detect it.'

But Harold, never heeding that cynical smile, went on with his story to the bitter end, and then proceeded further to relate the generous offer he had just made in the library to Iris, 'which my cousin,' he said coldly, 'has been ill-advised enough, I regret to say, to decline with unnecessary warmth of sentiment and language. Under these painful circumstances, unpleasant as such a course must be to me, nothing remains for me but to prove the new will; and lest you should ever say I'd taken you by surprise, and not given you all due warning, I've brought the document with

me here to-day, that you may judge for yourself of its authenticity and validity. This is it,' and he took it up from the table affectionately, with a warm smile of parental partiality—his bantling, his favourite, his own pet handiwork. 'If you'll take the trouble to cast your eye down that,' he said, with an air of profound conviction, 'I think you'll agree with me that Iris would have done far better for herself if she'd accepted my equitable, and even generous, offer.'

Uncle Tom took up the paper from the table with the same sceptical and supercilious smile as ever. This tyro to suppose he could forge a will that would baffle the acutest and most experienced hand in the whole Probate and Divorce Division! The thing was monstrous, absurd, incredible. But as he read and read, both Eustace Le Marchant and Harold Knyvett, who were standing by and watching his features closely, perceived a change come slowly over his purple face. He was no longer amused; he was by rapid stages first puzzled, then surprised and annoyed, then vexed and baffled, then finally angry and very indignant. That he should show his anger, Harold knew by a keen intuition for a certain sign of the success of his strategy. If the will were bad, if the signature were doubtful, if a flaw had been suspected in the law of the case or the wording of the document, if a loophole had been left for escape anywhere, that old fool Whitmarsh, with his professional skill and his legal acumen, would of course have spotted it; and if he had spotted it, he would have pounced down then and there, with the savage joy of battle in his keen old eyes, upon the expectant culprit. But his silence and his wrath, his internal fuming, were auguries of good for Harold's success; the greatest authority on the subject of wills in all England had no weapon left but impotent rage with which to meet and face that magnificent device of his.

Harold twisted the top button off its thread once more in his transport of delight, and then played, for a change, with the empty button-hole.

'You scoundrel!' Uncle Tom cried, finding words at last, and rising up in his wrath with an eager desire to strangle the fellow then and there, as he sat smiling and fidgeting inanely before him. 'Don't try to come any of your non-

sense over me ! You forged this will yourself, and you know you forged it.'

Harold's thin lips curled graciously up, and he lowered his head with polite sarcasm.

'That will be for a court of justice in England to determine,' he answered coldly.

'Did he forge it, Uncle Tom?' Iris asked from her corner, with perfect calmness, turning round to her uncle. 'Are you sure it's a forgery? Can you be quite certain about it?'

'Quite certain,' Uncle Tom answered, gasping hard for breath. But he wrote with a pencil on the back of an envelope, which he handed across to her for greater security, 'A forgery, beyond the shadow of a doubt, my dear, but the cleverest scoundrel I ever knew, for all that. There's absolutely nothing tangible to go upon. It's as clever as sin. He'll prove his will, and we can never disprove it.'

At that outward and visible sign of the old man's defeat, Harold sat and chuckled inwardly to himself.

'It's not too late even now, Mr. Whitmarsh,' he observed, in a low and gracious tone. 'I'm open still to negotiations. If you'd like to use your influence with Iris on the subject——'

But before he could finish that sentence in his cowardly throat, Vernon Blake had risen from his place in the corner, and come forward all aglow with fierce, youthful indignation.

'You may do as you like about the will,' the painter said, half choking, and planting himself full in front of the astonished Harold, 'but if you dare to utter another word to insult Miss Knyvett by your disgraceful offers——'

The rest was unspoken, but a significant glance at the painter's fist efficiently replaced the remainder of that suppressed sentence.

'That'll do, Blake,' Uncle Tom responded, taken aback at this well-meant, though unexpected, interposition. 'The fellow's proposals will *not* be entertained. But we don't need your help in solving the question, thank you. To forge a will first, indeed, and then think he can force a girl like Iris to marry him off-hand on the strength of the forgery! I'm ashamed of the fool for his ignorance of character!'

As he spoke, Harold Knyvett folded up the forged document with trembling fingers, and replaced it carefully in his breast-pocket.

'Very well, Mr. Whitmarsh,' he said, with freezing frigidity, 'you reject my olive-branch; you'll be sorry for it hereafter. This is war now, open war, with all of you; and not by my fault. I shall prove the will and resume my property. Meanwhile, under the present unpleasant circumstances, it must be obvious at once to the meanest understanding that you can none of you accept my hospitality any longer. I'll ring for the carriage to take your luggage round at once to the Royal.'

Before he could reach the electric-bell at the side, however, Eustace Le Marchant, who had for some time been whispering apart very seriously in a corner with Meriem, gave a meaning glance and a look of query towards his Kabyle *fiancée*. The beautiful Algerian answered with a quiet nod of assent. Then Eustace stepped out into the middle of the room.

'Stop!' he cried, in a very stern and determined voice. 'Don't dare to touch this lady's bell,' and he waved his hand vaguely sideways towards Meriem. 'The mistress of Sidi Aia empowers me to forbid you. I, too, have some important documents here—of earlier date, but of greater genuineness—that may serve to put a somewhat different complexion upon this person's action. It was not our intention at first to produce them at all, as against Miss Knyvett's original claim. We were willing that she should inherit unopposed, in a friendly fashion; but if you think this person, sir,' and he turned to address himself to Uncle Tom for a moment, 'is likely to succeed in his attempted fraud, it may be worth while, at all hazards, to checkmate him immediately by any means in our power. These are the papers. I'll read them over to you all first; you can then examine them finally at your leisure, and judge for yourself of their authenticity.'

Harold's face was livid with excitement now. He clutched the buttonhole hard with all his might. He had neglected one chance, and that chance had defeated him! He saw the whole truth in the twinkling of an eye. The barefooted native girl was Clarence Knyvett's daughter and heiress.

But not legitimate! Oh no, not legitimate! By the law of England, certainly not legitimate! It was all to no avail! It would profit them nothing! In the eye of the law, she was nobody's daughter. Thank Heaven for that charming obliquity of the law! Blackstone for ever! Long live injustice!

CHAPTER LI.

CHECK AGAIN.

SLOWLY Eustace unfolded the little bundle of documents he held in his hand, and laid them one by one on the table before him. They were worn and ragged to the last degree; mere rough memoranda jotted down on thin sheets of foreign notepaper; and they were folded very small into numerous squares, so much rubbed at the edges by long wear that they hardly held together in places where the strain was greatest. Uncle Tom regarded these doubtful allies with a suspicious glance. Remarkably flimsy material, indeed, he thought to himself silently, to lay before the Probate and Divorce Division!

Eustace, however, undeterred by his scrutiny, proceeded next to produce from his pocket a broken Kabyle charm—a tiny metal box which Iris at once recognised with a start as the one that Meriem had worn habitually round her neck in the mountains at Beni-Merzoug.

'These documents,' he said demonstratively, turning to Uncle Tom with a quiet smile, 'were found enclosed in that little box, which you see before you now on the table. The box was given to Meriem by her father, Clarence Knyvett, who strongly urged her never on any account to lose it, or part with it. It was unfortunately broken by the accident with the train, and picked up by me on the line, near Beni-Mansour, in its present damaged and crushed condition. I then for the first time became aware of the nature of the papers it contained. Meriem for her part had ascertained their importance some weeks earlier, but had been unwilling, for Miss Knyvett's sake, to disclose their contents to me, or to anyone. Nor did I in turn contemplate disclosing them till this very morning. We had made up our minds not to

disturb Miss Knyvett's title to Sir Arthur's estate. Under existing circumstances, however, and to defeat Mr. Harold Knyvett's designs—upon which I, for my part, offer no opinion—we think ourselves fully justified to-day in bringing them forward for your consideration.'

He looked at Meriem, who nodded a silent approval once more. Then he took up the first document and read it aloud.

'It's a statement,' he said, 'by Meriem's father, Clarence Knyvett, explaining the circumstances under which he became, to all intents and purposes, a Kabyle in Algeria, and the reasons he had for so disposing of the other documents found with it.'

Everybody leant forward with hushed attention. And this was the statement to which Iris, Uncle Tom, and Harold Knyvett listened with breathless interest :

'I, Clarence Knyvett, formerly cornet of the 8th Hussars in the British service, and lately, under the name of Joseph Leboutillier, a private in the 3rd Chasseurs d'Afrique, write this last account of my life and misfortunes for the benefit of my only daughter, Meriem, to whose care I now confide it, in explanation of my accompanying will and annexed documents. The nature of the space to which I must entrust them compels brevity. I left England under strong suspicion, which I could not refute, of having forged my father, Admiral Knyvett's, name to sundry notes of hand, bills, and acceptances. I solemnly swear before the face of heaven that I did not forge one of these papers; that I received them all to be cashed on his account from my brother, Clarence Wilberforce Knyvett, whom I solemnly believe to have forged them himself; that I accepted them in good faith, on his representation, as bearing my father's genuine signature; that I believed a detailed story he palmed off upon me as to why they had been uttered and why he did not desire to cash them in person; that I foolishly accepted part of the proceeds as a loan from him to assist me in the payment of debts I ought never to have contracted; and that by so doing I left myself without any means of disproving the vile accusation which my brother Charles at last permitted to be brought by my father against me in the matter.'

Uncle Tom looked up with a glance of supreme contempt at his enemy, Harold.

‘Like father, like son,’ he murmured half inaudibly. ‘He was always a sneak, Charles Wilberforce Knyvett.’

‘My brother Charles,’ Eustace went on reading, ‘had laid his plans so deeply, and woven his webs around me so cunningly, that I found it impossible, when the exposure came, to make my father believe the truth, though I afterwards wrote him more than one letter in the depth of my misery, which I trust may have opened his eyes before he died to the true state of the case between us. For the time, however, he believed Charles, and only allowed me to escape prosecution, which I knew must almost infallibly go against me—so incredible would my true story have sounded to any jury—by conniving at my escape under disguise from England. It would have been impossible, indeed, for me to set up the true defence without making admissions about a lady, a member of my family—not discreditable, but highly undesirable—which a sense of honour imperatively precluded me from ever making. Under these unhappy circumstances, I had no course open to me but to flee the country and take refuge in France, where I enlisted for my bread in the Third Chasseurs.’

‘A harum-scarum fellow,’ Uncle Tom murmured low; ‘but good-hearted, after all! I never thought him criminal; I never thought him criminal.’

Meriem’s eyes were dim with tears as Eustace read; but she held Iris’s hand tight in her own meanwhile, and Iris, in return, stroked her soft arm tenderly. The story went on in brief language to describe the circumstances under which Clarence Knyvett had felt himself bound in turn to desert from the French colours during what seemed to him the essentially unjust Kabyle war, and thus, of pure necessity, to cast in his lot with that half-savage Mahommedan mountain people.

‘By no fault of my own,’ he wrote pathetically, ‘I thus found myself at last proscribed and an outlaw before the eyes of the two most powerful and civilized nations in all Christendom, and compelled for my own safety outwardly to conform to the distasteful rites and usages of Islam. Hunted to earth, and banished for ever from home, I

accepted the inevitable. I became as a Kabyle, and took to myself a wife among my adopted countrymen. But not knowing what disposition of his property my father might make, and anxious to secure to my children the benefit, if any, accruing to them under his possible will, I induced my wife, after going through the native Kabyle ceremony with me in her own village, to be secretly married to me at the Mairie at St. Cloud, in accordance with the *lex loci* then and there prevailing, in a manner that would be recognised as undoubtedly valid by any English court of law.'

Eustace paused, and looked at Uncle Tom significantly. Uncle Tom arranged his necktie with much studied care, and glanced at his boots with a non-committing glance, much wondering what might next be coming in this very unexpected and upsetting document.

'So Meriem's Uncle Clarence's daughter after all, in law as in fact!' Iris exclaimed fervently.

'Stop a moment, stop a moment, my dear!' Uncle Tom interposed, with a frightened face. 'Not so fast, Iris, not so fast, I beg of you. The register of the *État Civil* at St. Cloud was completely destroyed in the last insurrection—before our own—and the marriage may, therefore, be provable or not—provable or not, according to circumstances.'

With a quiet smile, Eustace read the paper to the very end, where Clarence Knyvett, at length, declared how he went forth with his life in his hand on his last expedition, ignorant whether he would ever return alive or not, and anxious for the safety of his only daughter.

'It's attested, you observe,' he said, handing it over for examination to Uncle Tom, 'by two priests of the Mission at St. Cloud, as having been deposed to before them by Joseph Lebentillier; and it's also sworn to as a true statement—unexamined judicially, *comme papier de famille*, by *le nommé Yusuf, Kabyle*, before the *Juge de Paix* at Palaestro, in Grande Kabylie.'

'So I see,' Uncle Tom responded drily. As yet, uncertain whither this thing might lead, he was disinclined to commit himself to anything definite.

But Harold Knyvett looked down at them all with a fixed sneer. 'I should like immensely to see the proof of this alleged marriage,' he remarked scornfully.

‘You shall,’ Eustace answered with great promptitude. ‘Here it is, you observe, a sworn copy, extracted from the *Actes de l’Etat Civil de St. Cloud-en-Kabylie*, before the insurrection, attesting both the civil marriage of *le nommé Yusuf* before the Maire of that commune, and, on a separate form, the religious ceremony before the mission priests of Our Lady of Africa.’

Uncle Tom took the little documents up and examined them critically.

‘It may possibly be a valid enough contract,’ he answered, with dubious and oracular reticence. As a matter of fact he saw at a glance they were simply unassailable.

‘The third paper I have to produce here is not a legal one,’ Eustace continued, smiling. ‘It’s a certificate of the baptism of Meriem Mary, daughter of Clarence Knyvett, otherwise Yusuf, otherwise Joseph Leboutillier, by Brother Antoine, called Père Paternoster, a mission priest of the same Order.’

‘Am I a Christian then, after all?’ Meriem cried out, with a sudden burst of comprehension as to the meaning of this hitherto misunderstood document. ‘Did Yusuf make a Christian of me when I was a little child without my ever knowing it?’

‘Yes, dearest,’ Iris answered, examining the certificate, and kissing her cousin’s forehead tenderly. ‘And if Yusuf hadn’t, you’d have been one of yourself, for nobody could ever have made a real Mahomedan of you.’

‘Thank Heaven for that!’ Meriem cried with a sigh, ‘for ever since I heard of that horrid business down there at St. Cloud I’ve longed to be a Christian like you, Iris.’

‘The fourth document,’ Eustace went on with calm persistence, ‘is the last will and testament of Clarence Knyvett, duly signed and attested with the English attestation clause before two witnesses, according to which paper the testator leaves and bequeaths——’

There was a dead pause, and all listened eagerly, Uncle Tom in particular being keen as a beagle on this last most important point of all.

‘Everything he dies possessed of, real or personal, in equal parts, as respects one moiety to his daughter Meriem Mary, and as respects the other moiety in proportional

shares to the children of his beloved brother, the Rev. Reginald Knyvett, M.A., to the total exclusion of his two other brothers, Arthur and Charles, or their descendants.'

With an eager movement, Uncle Tom took the will and glanced over it very carefully. As he looked, his face grew brighter and brighter. It was clear he accepted its authenticity offhand. 'Half a loaf's better than no bread, Iris, my dear,' he muttered at last with a smile of relief. 'You're entitled to a moiety. As far as it goes, that's highly satisfactory. Mr. Le Marchant, your hand. I beg your pardon. I think these documents will hold water. Harold Knyvett, you infernal scoundrel, I fancy we've cooked your goose at last. Your forgery was a confoundedly clever forgery, but it hasn't profited you much after all. Things are not as good as they might be, quite, Iris; but if the Claimant's really, as these papers seem to show, the lawful issue of your uncle Clarence Knyvett's body—and she may be, she may be—why, we can't grudge her half—we really can't grudge it to her. And they've come in most opportunely, I must confess, to cut that desperate forger's throat; for I'll allow, my dear,' and his voice dropped low, 'that his forgery would have been the very hardest to fight against I've ever known in the whole of my long and unique legal experience.'

Iris rose and folded Meriem in her arms. 'Then we each take half!' she murmured joyfully.

'I wanted you to have all, Iris,' Meriem answered through her tears, pressing her cousin tight to her bosom in return; 'but when this wicked man tried to get it all for himself, Eustace said to me—and I quite agreed with him—it was the only way possible to defeat his wickedness!'

CHAPTER LII.

CHECKMATE.

HAROLD KNYVETT looked on stealthily with a deadly stare in his cold blue eyes. The corners of his set mouth were twitching horribly now. 'It's all very well, this hugging and embracing!' he exclaimed with a sneer—all his native

brutality breaking out at last—‘but you’ve *me* to reckon with, you must recollect—you’ve *me* to reckon with; and I’m not to be put off with miraculous discoveries of hidden wills in a Kabyle girl’s necklace, I can tell you that. Make up your minds for a good battle-royal. I shall fight you every inch—every word—every letter of it.’

Uncle Tom had chosen his side now, and meant to stick to it like a man at last. ‘You can’t,’ he said shortly. ‘You’ll find it’s no use. Those documents would carry any case in England.’

Harold Knyvett glared back at him with eyes like a tiger’s on the point to spring. ‘They’re forgeries!’ he cried in an icy voice, ‘mean, disgraceful, inartistic forgeries! That fellow got them up,’ and he pointed with his forefinger contemptuously at Eustace. ‘I can see it in his face. He’s a miserable forger. And he’s got them up very badly too. He’s copied the signatures. That’s easy enough to do. Any fool can copy a signature, you know. I could copy ‘em myself. I could copy Sir Arthur’s——’ his blood-shot eye was roving wildly round the room now, ‘as soon as look at it. I’ll do it before you, if you like, just to show you how it’s done. The difficulty’s not there; it’s to make your forgery reasonable and *vraisemblable*; and this fool hasn’t managed that at all; he’s invented an absurd, cock-and-bull, melodramatic story that no jury ‘d believe; whereas here’s *my* will—Sir Arthur’s own hand—at Aix, you observe—all of them dead—two indubitable witnesses. Ha, ha, ha! Not a shadow of doubt about *that*. The veritable thing! Just look at it yourself. A beautiful will! An irreproachable document!’ He could hardly control himself with excitement and anger now. He was drunk with rage. He drew the roll like a dagger, and brandished it in their faces.

Suddenly, with a start, he grew cool once more. A storm of conflicting emotions seemed to be sweeping through him.

‘Why, you’re taking it for granted,’ he cried, again scornful, ‘that this fellow Clarence, if ever he came to Algeria at all—which we none of us know—outlived Alexander—the original legatee, the first inheritor. Unless he did, he never inherited, and never could dispose. Don’t go too fast. It doesn’t all lie between this woman and Iris,

as you seem to think. You've me to reckon with. *Me*, ME, to reckon with!—striking his breast hard, with insane intensity—‘and you'll find me a devilish tough person, too, for anyone to fight against.’

‘Oh, that's all right,’ Uncle Tom resumed, turning over the papers critically once more, with his experienced glance. ‘We've satisfied ourselves about all *that* long ago, you may be sure. Do you think I took up practice in the Probate and Divorce Division yesterday? No, no, Harold Knyvett, don't bluster any longer; the case is dead; you may retire gracefully. You're not in this cause any more, I assure you. Your forged will is so much waste-paper. Clever, I admit, but ineffectual, ineffectual. Iris, my dear, will you do me the favour to ring the bell, and order your carriage to take Mr. Harold Knyvett's affairs round to the Royal?’

But before you go, Mr. Harold, let me just explain the case succinctly to you. Clarence Knyvett, *alias* Joseph Leboultillier, *alias* Yusuf the Kabyle, on indubitable evidence, outlived his brother Alexander, as I at first to my intense dissatisfaction discovered, by several weeks—quite long enough to inherit, and therefore quite long enough to dispose legally of his own property. Till to-day, I was under the impression that he died intestate, without lawful issue, in which case, under your grandfather's will—that most extraordinary will—so unsafe not to employ a professional hand!—the estate would have descended in due course to his brother Arthur. I now learn from these papers supplied by Miss Meriem it was not so. The papers, I judge, are undoubtedly genuine, and above suspicion. They have not been thrust upon us by their present possessors. They were only produced under stress of necessity to baffle *you*. That guarantees and corroborates their intrinsic credibility. I accept them as valuable allies against you. Let us use plain words. They nullify your forgery. Sir Arthur never owned the estate at all. He had nothing to leave but his savings, if any, from his half-pay. Sidi Aia he held as part of the trust. Clarence Knyvett was all along the real possessor. And Clarence Knyvett leaves his fortune in equal shares, one half to his daughter—my dear, your hand; thank you—and one half to his niece and mine, your cousin Iris, whom you tried to defraud by your vile machinations. These

papers prove the entire case. I never saw a clearer set of documents in my life. We can settle it between us, Meriem, when we get back to England, in a friendly suit. And you, sir, you may go to Bath with your forgery!

The word Bath, having been loudly but somewhat inarticulately pronounced by Mr. Whitmarsh, cannot be guaranteed as textually correct by the present chronicler. Indeed, it seems not improbable, from internal evidence, that Uncle Tom, in his warmth, really made use of a somewhat hotter and stronger expression.

But Harold Knyvett's hand trembled fiercely now. His face was a horrible sight to behold. Disappointment, rage, mean baffled ambition, all were pictured upon his distorted features at that moment. He saw at a glance that everything was lost. He had played his trump card, and been overtrumped outright by a barefooted Kabyle girl. This wretched conspiracy of the truth against a lie, of honour against duplicity, of fact against forgery, had unaccountably triumphed! His cleverness and his skill had all been set at naught by a dead man's will and a good man's forethought. He was mad, mad, mad with wrath and indignation. Can months of patient toil thus go for nothing? Can hours of dishonest industry thus pass unrewarded? 'Tis an unjust world, where an able forger isn't even allowed to come by his own that he has plotted for so cleverly. If there had been a fire in the room Harold Knyvett would have seized those disgusting, discomposing, truth-telling documents, and flung them into it with wild inconsequence. As there wasn't, a savage thought surged up fiercely in his mind. He would chew them up small and swallow them wholesale! He made a mad dart across the room to the table where they lay, with all the wild energy of rising insanity. Eustace and Vernon Blake anticipated in part his savage design, and caught him by the shoulders with stern resolve before he could lay his trembling hands upon the precious papers.

'Turn him out,' Uncle Tom said, in a calm voice, as retributive justice. But there was no need for that. Harold Knyvett, baulked even of that last revenge, turned slowly of his own accord to the door and went down the steps, crushed and broken. As he left the room, quivering from head to foot like a whipped cur, his face was livid with strange dis-

tortions. Iris saw with horror not unmixed with disgust, that he, a Knyvett and a gentleman born, looking back at his enemies who had fairly conquered him in just fight, lolled out his tongue, like a street boy or the clown at a circus. It was not till long months after Meriem and she were both happily married that they learned the truth, the horrible truth, which Uncle Tom and their husbands knew before nightfall. Harold Knyvett went forth from Sidi Aia that afternoon to Yate-Westbury's madhouse a raving maniac.

As he left the room, Uncle Tom came forward, and gave his hand, with frank apology, to Eustace. 'I've wronged you, Mr. Le Marchant,' he said cordially. 'I see you're a friend. I took you for an enemy. But I'm not too old yet to acknowledge a mistake. I regret my error. Now, why didn't you produce those documents earlier?'

'Because,' Meriem put in, with her transparent simplicity, 'I didn't wish it. I told him not to. I wanted Iris to have all the money, as I promised, and I thought Eustace and I would be happy without it.'

'Eustace and you!' Uncle Tom exclaimed, with a sudden merry twinkle in the corner of his eye. 'Whew! whew! So that's the way the wind blows, after all, is it? Upon my soul, I never thought of that. Remarkably blind of me—a man of my age. I took you for a fortune-hunter, Le Marchant. I was wrong there, I own; but, after all, I wasn't so much out; for even now, it seems, you'll marry the heiress.'

'Against his will, though, Uncle Tom,' Iris cried enthusiastically. 'Here's Meriem's been telling me all about it. And, oh! they've both behaved so beautifully! How much you've misjudged them, you dear, dreadful old uncle! Why, if it hadn't been for Harold producing this forged will,' and she tossed aside that precious document carelessly, for Harold had actually left his bantling behind him, in his blank despair, 'Meriem was never going to show us those papers at all, and Mr. Le Marchant was going to acquiesce in her never showing them! Now, uncle dear, don't you just call that devotion?'

Uncle Tom seized both their hands in his with fervour,

and positively went so far, in an access of penitence, as to stoop down and kiss that distinctly good-looking girl, the Claimant, on her smooth, high forehead.

‘My dear,’ he remarked, in an apologetic tone, patting her cheek with his hand, ‘if ever you practise as long as I’ve done—which isn’t likely—in the Probate and Divorce Division in England, you may be excused for taking, as a general rule, the lowest possible view of human nature and all its motives. That there’s anything in the way of the milk of human kindness left uncurdled in my mind at all, does high credit, I assure you, to my original disposition.’

‘And,’ Meriem began innocently, ‘when Iris and Vernon are married——’

‘God bless my soul, what’s that?’ Uncle Tom exclaimed with a burst, turning round upon her sharply. ‘Iris and who? What—him—the painter-fellow? Why, my dear Miss Meriem, or whatever else your heathenish name is, who on earth put such a ridiculous notion as that into your pretty head now?’

Meriem stood back, all covered with confusion. But Iris, blushing somewhat, yet with a certain not ungraceful pride on her dainty little features, came forward with Vernon Blake, looking perhaps a trifle awkward and guilty about the eyes.

‘Uncle Tom,’ she said shyly, ‘Meriem’s quite right. Vernon and I have arranged that part of our affairs privately between ourselves, without any assistance, and we think we understand one another now altogether. So Meriem suggests, as a first rough idea for the division of the estate, that Vernon and I should keep Sidi Aia, while she and Mr. Le Marchant take the villa at Aix for themselves to live in.’

Uncle Tom’s hair stood on end with surprise—partly because he ran his fat hand through it once or twice abstractedly.

‘God bless my soul!’ he exclaimed once more in a puzzled way; ‘that innocent-faced painter-fellow, who never looked as if he could say “Boh” to a goose—that *he* should have gone and executed a flank movement in this way! Who the dickens would have thought he had it in him? Who the dickens would have supposed it was *he* that was after her? Who the dickens would have imagined

she'd ever take him? And that I should all along have been keeping my weather-eye fixed firm on the other one!

. Well, well, Iris, it's your own affair. You take the law into your own hands, as a rule; and all I can say is, if your man turns out one half as decent a chap as the fellow I didn't want you to marry seems to have done, you'll never have any cause to be ashamed of him. Though you will admit it does upset a man's calculations most confoundedly!

'And, Iris, dear,' Mrs. Knyvett ejaculated with a sigh, glancing round the cabinets and tables uneasily, 'do you know I really do believe Harold never, after all, brought over my bronchitis kettle!'

THE END.

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